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DO DURING
THE WINTER** P.7

**HOW WARBLERS
AVOID STORMS**
P.11

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CALLS** P.10

April 2015

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SANDHILL CRANES
gather along the
Platte every spring.
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Wouldn't you know it?

Pete Dunne's column about Cape May, New Jersey, has inspired an article about Galveston Island, Texas.

In our last issue, Pete tallied all the reasons why Cape May, New Jersey, deserves consideration as the best birding location on the planet ("Birder at Large," February 2015, page 14). These included not only that the area claims both the spring and autumn Big Sit records but also that, for many years, it held the North American yard-list record, too. No fewer than 316 species, Pete wrote, had been recorded in or from one yard in Cape May.

If you are at all like me and Managing Editor Matt Mendenhall, you probably read that and wondered, 316 species? In one yard? And someone somewhere, in another yard, has recorded even more? We had to know more about the new record-holder. You can read about him in Matt's article "A Yard Like No Other" (page 22).

And wouldn't you know it? The Platte River, a regular for many years on lists of great birding destinations, is still the place to visit — or, if you are at all like writer Cecily Nabors, to visit again. She made her first pilgrimage to see Nebraska's Sandhill Cranes in March 1995. Then, curious what effect 20 years of development, water diversions, and drought would have on the great swirling clouds of circling cranes, she went back. As she writes in our cover story ("Return to Crane River," page 16), she needn't have worried.

And wouldn't you know it again? There is a different way to identify birds that have few outstanding plumage characters or are seen under challenging conditions. According to Kevin Karlson and Dale Rosset, authors of the long-awaited *Peterson Reference Guide to Birding by Impression*, the trick lies in concentrating on size, structure, body language, and other basics. You can read an illuminating chapter from the book, on identifying sparrows, on page 26.



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Newsstand National Publisher Services

Subscriptions (877) 252-8141

Foreign Subscriptions (903) 636-1121

Corporate Headquarters

Madavor Media, LLC

25 Braintree Hill Office Park | Suite 404

Braintree, MA | 02184

SUBSCRIPTIONS: 1 Year (6 Issues) US \$26.95, Canada \$32.95, Foreign: \$34.95

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to BirdWatching Magazine, P.O. Box 4300, Big Sandy, TX 75755-4300. Subscribers allow 4-6 weeks for change of address to become effective. Subscriptions ordered are noncancelable and nonrefundable unless otherwise promoted. Return postage must accompany all manuscripts, drawings and photographs submitted if they are to be returned, and no responsibility can be assumed for unsolicited materials. All rights in letters sent to BirdWatching Magazine will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and copyright purposes and as subject to unrestricted right to edit and to comment editorially. Requests for permission to reprint should be sent to the Permissions and Reprints Department. The title Birders World DBA BirdWatching Magazine is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Contents copyright © 2015 by Madavor Media, LLC. All rights reserved. Nothing can be reprinted in whole or in part without permission from the publisher. Printed in the U.S.A.

www.BirdWatchingDaily.com

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Small Groups

A small, colorful bird with a black and white speckled head and back, and a yellow and orange belly, perched on a red branch. The bird has a black cap with white spots and a yellow throat. Its back is black with white spots, and its belly is yellow and orange. It is perched on a red branch with green leaves in the background.

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Aurelio Miranda Sousa

FISH HAWK: Osprey that were tracked to the Caribbean, Central America, and South America stayed close to rivers, coasts, and lakes in winter.

Osprey in winter and spring

New studies reveal habitat choices, migration routes of fish-eating raptor

Osprey experts writing in the *Journal of Raptor Research* have revealed details of the bird's winter habitat, described new winter grounds in Argentina, and shed light on the fish hawk's return flights.

From 1995 to 2009, researchers led by Brian Washburn of the National Wildlife Research Center in Ohio tracked 79 adult birds by satellite to their wintering areas in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Previous recoveries

of banded birds had revealed the general range, but GPS-enabled tracking devices gave the team new insights.

About half of the raptors wintered on rivers, 30 percent stayed near coasts, and approximately 20 percent preferred lakes. Females stayed in their wintering areas for about two weeks longer than males. Individual Osprey returned to the same area each year.

The species is common in winter from the coasts of Colombia to eastern Brazil,

but in the last 20 years, it has been found in greater numbers much farther south — in northern and central Argentina, where it is now reported year-round. Reservoirs and lakes that stock native and exotic fish “may have provided a new habitat and feeding opportunity” for the birds, reports author Miguel Saggese.

The first in-depth study of spring migration, conducted from 1996 to 2013 by Mark Martell of Audubon Minnesota and six other scientists,

found that the majority of East Coast-nesting Osprey wintered in South America and crossed the Caribbean Sea to Haiti, Jamaica, or Cuba in flights lasting 27-40 hours. Then the birds continued north through Cuba and Florida and up the coast as far north as Maine.

Martell also learned that most Osprey wintering in Mexico and Central America flew north through valleys west of the Rocky Mountains and followed similar routes south in fall.



YOUR QUESTIONS
ANSWERED BY
BIRD BANDER
JULIE CRAVES

I have fed birds for about 47 years in the same backyard location. Over the last several years during the month of October, all the year-round birds seem to disappear until mid-November. Where do they go? — *Oliver Fleming, Ahoskie, North Carolina*

Fall is a period of abundant resources: Songbirds can avail themselves of large crops of seeds, nuts, berries, and other plant foods and therefore may rely less on feeding stations. While many bird species are found in one location year-round, they often move short distances in fall and winter, so the individuals in your yard in summer may not be the same birds that spend the winter with you.

For example, all or parts of populations of American Robin, Blue Jay, chickadees, and sapsuckers may shift south most winters. One autumn, a hunter in southern Ohio shot a Mourning Dove I had banded in my southeastern Michigan yard in the summer. A Blue Jay I had banded in the winter ended up hundreds of miles east the following spring. I suspect what you are seeing is a changing of the guard among individuals of familiar species during the time of fall transition.

(continued on page 10)

Julie Craves is supervisor of avian research at the Rouge River Bird Observatory at the University of Michigan Dearborn and a research associate at the university's Environmental Interpretive Center.

EYE ON CONSERVATION



Ciro Albano

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED: Brazil's Araripe Manakin may be the world's most beautiful.

First reserves for spectacular manakin

Araripe Manakin, a critically endangered species that numbers no more than 800 individuals and survives in the smallest of areas — only 11 square miles in Ceará in north-eastern Brazil — will now be better protected thanks to the establishment of two reserves.

The sparrow-size bird was discovered in 1996 and described two years later. It exists only in a narrow strip of humid forest on the slopes of the Araripe Plateau, an area subject to continuing pressure from agriculture and the development of recreational facilities.

The reserves were made possible through two actions: the purchase of a parcel of land encompassing 140 acres, and the consummation of a formal agreement with a neighboring landowner, who designated 27 acres of his land as a fully protected area.

The newly created 140-acre reserve borders the Araripe National Forest to the south and includes a house that may one day be converted to a tourist lodge. In addition, a river valley connects the property with the Sítio Fundão State

Park, a fully protected 230-acre area managed by the state. The 27-acre parcel located to the south is now a private reserve formally recognized as preserved in perpetuity.

The manakin needs permanent springs and streams with prime nesting territories and good moist-forest habitat, all features

provided in the acquisitions. The species prefers the lower and middle levels of the forest, where it feeds on fruit. It shares its habitat with other species found nowhere but Brazil, such as

Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, White-browed Antpitta, and Caatinga Antshrike. Just above their habitat is a plateau that is home to more than 100 additional species, including the endemic Planalto Slaty-Antshrike and Ceará Leaf-tosser.

The acquisition was led by Aquasis, a Brazilian conservation organization, with support from American Bird Conservancy. A joint reforestation project of Aquasis and ABC that resulted in the planting of 4,652 native seedlings in the area prompted the acquisition collaboration.



American Bird Conservancy is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization whose mission is to conserve native birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. You can learn more about American Bird Conservancy's international programs at www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/international.

Biking for birds

Pedaling birder visits 28 states and finds 617, maybe 618, species

Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Bald Eagle — those are the species that Massachusetts birder Dorian Anderson ticked on New Year's Day over a year ago. They kicked off what would turn out to be an unprecedented and wildly successful Big Year.

Determined to raise money for the American Birding Association and the Conservation Fund, Anderson was on a mission to find as many birds as he could throughout the year without the aid of gas-powered vehicles. As we noted in our April 2014 issue ("Birding Briefs," page 9), he expected to ride 12,000 miles and hoped to see 550-600 species.

Throughout the year, he traveled from Massachusetts to South Florida, and from there through Texas to southeastern Arizona. Then he turned northeast toward Colorado and snaked northwest to Washington and south along the Pacific coast before returning to Texas. He ended the year near Dallas, after visiting 28 states. He had kayaked eight miles, walked about 490 miles, and biked 17,830 miles (about 49 miles per day) — far more than planned.

Better yet, on Thanksgiving Day at Estero Llano Grande State Park in South Texas (Hotspot Near You No. 161), not only did he add five new species

to blow past his goal of 600, but he was among birders who found a female Red-legged Honeycreeper, a visitor from Mexico never before officially recorded in the U.S.

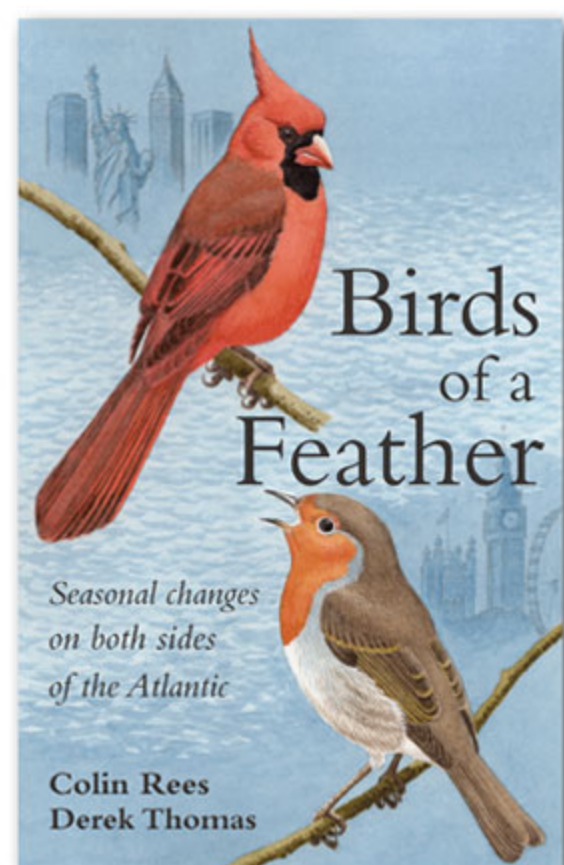
A flock of about 40 Smith's Longspurs that he spotted on December 28 near Lake Tawakoni east of Dallas (Hotspot Near You No. 197) capped off his year at 617 species — so far. If records committees from Texas and the American Birding Association accept the honeycreeper as a wild, countable bird, his final total will be 618.

The honeycreeper, Anderson says, was one of the five most

memorable birds of the year, along with a "totally unexpected" Black-throated Blue Warbler on the Upper Texas Coast, where the species is rare; an up-close White-tailed Ptarmigan in Colorado; a flock of Greater Sage-Grouse on a ridge in Utah; and a Hook-billed Kite in South Texas.

He raised more than \$45,000 for bird conservation during 2014, and he hopes to raise more through his blog (<http://bikingforbirds.blogspot.com>), by speaking at bird clubs and universities, and by writing a book about his journey and the conservation issues he encountered.

What we're reading



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

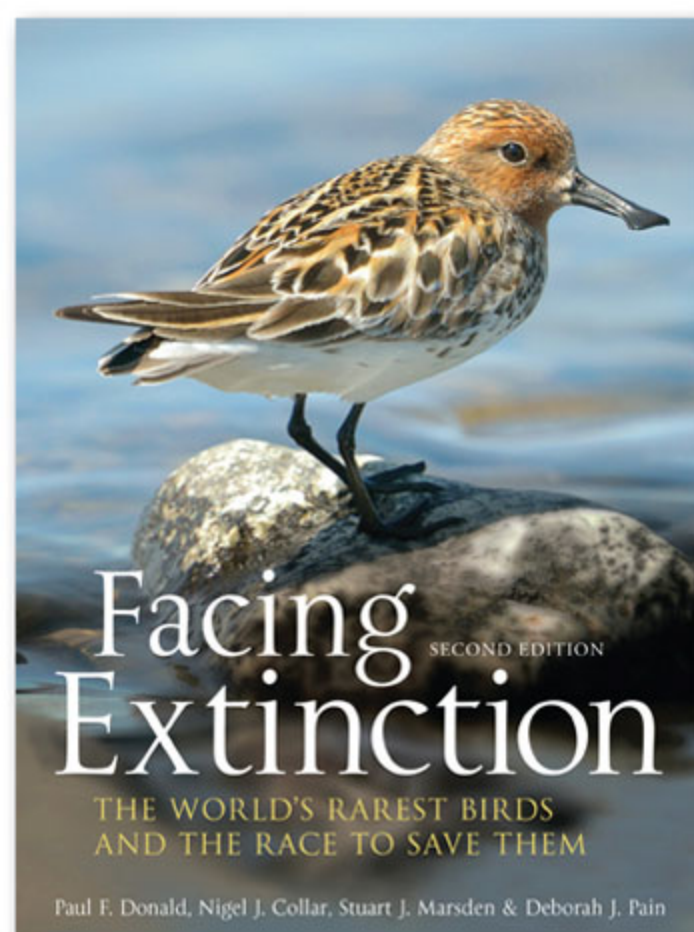
By Colin Rees and Derek Thomas

Colin Rees lives in Annapolis, Maryland. Derek Thomas lives surrounded by the sea on the Gower Peninsula in Wales. In this book, they portray birds and birding in the U.S. and the U.K., offering month-by-month accounts of their separate but linked birding years. The result left us with a greater appreciation for the universality of both the changing seasons and the movements of birds, and a heightened admiration for all that unites birdwatchers the world over.

FACING EXTINCTION

by Paul Donald, Nigel Collar, Stuart Marsden, and Deborah Pain

This new book from Britain's top bird conservationists examines the process and issues concerning extinction — how and why it happens and what can be done to prevent it. About 20 species from around the world are showcased, including the beautiful Brazilian Merganser, New Zealand's flightless Kakapo, and the spectacular Philippine Eagle. We liked the well-written accounts, which describe the heroic work being undertaken to move the birds from the brink of extinction.



Two Painted Buntings?

AOU considers whether the nonpareil has an equal

A gap of about 340 miles divides the two breeding populations of Painted Bunting: one in the southern Great Plains and the other along the southeastern Atlantic coast. Ornithologists have speculated for years that the two groups represent distinct species, largely because they winter and breed separately and molt and migrate on notably different schedules.

A genetic study published in 2011 may help decide if the species should finally be split. It showed the two populations are evolving independently "with no measurable gene flow between them" and that they began breaking away from each other between 26,000 and 115,000 years ago. Author Connie A. Herr wrote that they "should be recognized as separate management units" for conservation purposes, but she didn't suggest the species should be split officially.

In July 2014, Robert C. Tweit, a past president of the Western Bird Banding Association, a former editor of *North American Bird Bander*, and the author of dozens of accounts in the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas and the *Birds of North America* series, proposed that the classification committee of the American Ornithologists' Union declare the populations unique species.

The buntings' distinct ranges, behavioral differences, and lack of gene flow show that they are reproductively isolated, he says. The committee is expected to announce its decision this summer.

(continued from page 8)

As for why you have noticed this phenomenon only recently, it may have to do with habitat changes on a large, landscape scale over the decades. Even more likely, it could be due to climate and weather events that influence (for better or worse) food resources either during the nesting season in areas away from you or during fall in your area. Bird movements are quite complex. You might be seeing a temporary trend or a more enduring shift in the movements of your local birds.

Why do Blue Jays imitate hawks, even if no other birds are around? — L. Mann, Dexter, Michigan

Blue Jays have an impressive vocal repertoire that includes not only many sounds beyond their raucous *jay! jay!* calls but also other familiar oddball noises that resemble gurgles, rattles, and squeaky gates. Like other members of the corvid family, jays are pretty good mimics; they commonly impersonate Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks. I've also heard jays do credible Cooper's Hawk and Broad-winged Hawk calls, and I've read reports of them imitating American Kestrel and Osprey.

Several theories attempt to explain the behavior, two of which are most accepted and logical. The first says that jays are trying to warn other birds that a hawk is or was present. The second suggests that jays want to dupe other birds into thinking that a hawk is nearby, perhaps to gain access to a feeder. While on woodland walks, however, I have heard

(continued on page 12)

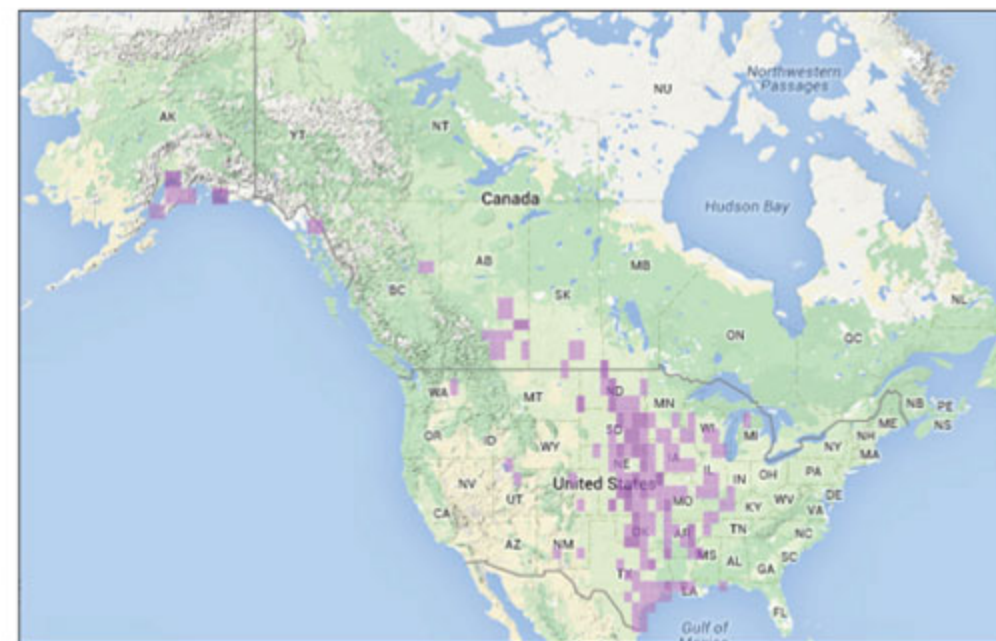
ON THE MOVE FROM eBIRD

A shorebird and bluebird that mark the start of spring

Hudsonian Godwit



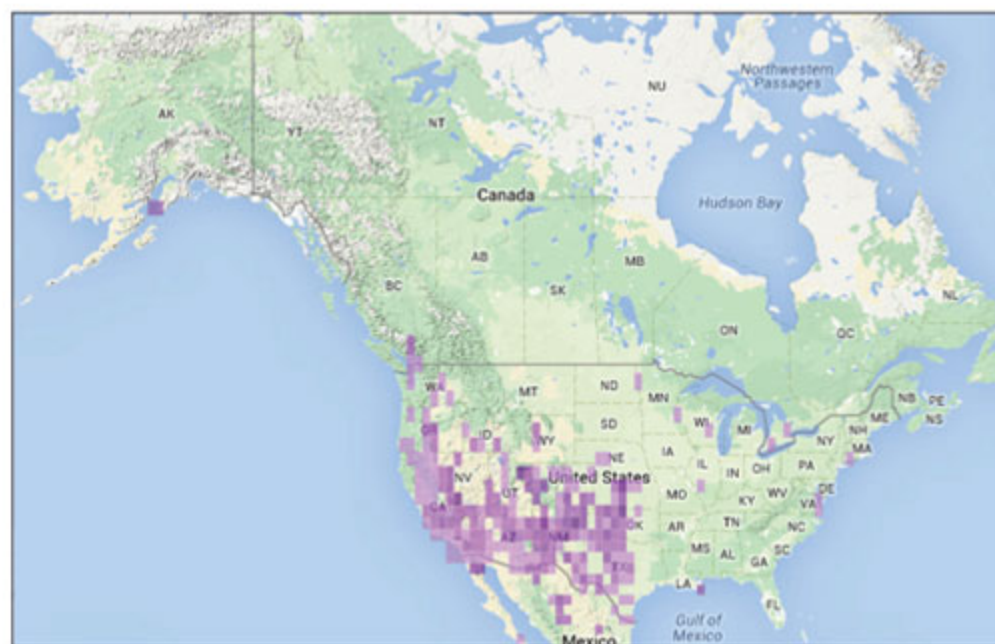
January 2004-14



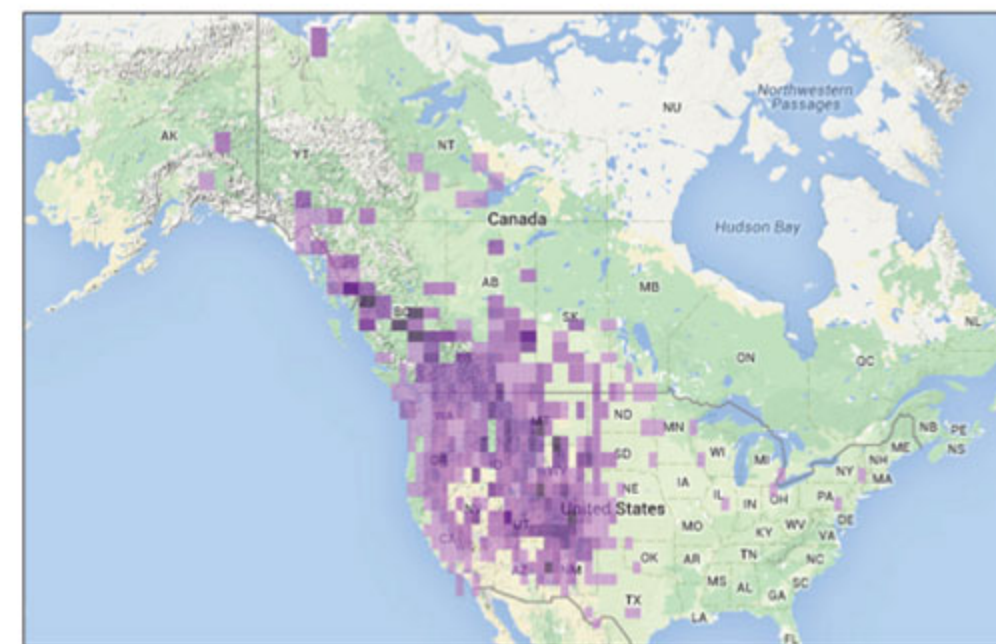
April 2004-14

The maps above show the distribution of Hudsonian Godwit in January and April, from 2004 to 2014. For about half of each year, it inhabits coastal lagoons and mudflats in a few core areas in southern South America, which are represented by dark purple squares on the map at left. The main wintering areas are in just three locations: Isla Chiloé in Chile, near Buenos Aires, and in Tierra del Fuego. By April, most godwits from Isla Chiloé are on their way to Alaska. They stop over in the Great Plains, where birders should look for them in bodies of shallow water from the Gulf coast of Texas to Alberta. Purple squares on the map represent sightings along this narrow longitudinal corridor. Populations from Buenos Aires and Tierra del Fuego migrate through the Great Plains a month later, in May, and ultimately reach breeding areas along southern Hudson Bay in Canada.

Mountain Bluebird



January 2004-14



April 2004-14

A sign of spring across much of the western United States is the return of Mountain Bluebird, a dainty blue thrush of open country. These eBird maps compare its distribution between January and April 2004-2014. The map at left shows the bird's nonbreeding distribution across much of the southwestern states and locally in northern Mexico. In winter, birders should look for the species in open habitats such as oak savannah and grasslands; be aware that it can often be found with other bluebird species. By April, Mountain Bluebird has returned to much of the western U.S., as well as western Canada and locally to southeastern Alaska. Favored breeding habitats include meadows and other open areas above 5,000 feet in elevation. Purple squares in central Illinois, northwestern Ohio, western Massachusetts, and other places represent very rare eastern records.

eBird

eBird is the real-time online checklist operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon. "On the Move" is written by eBird's Garrett MacDonald, Chris Wood, Marshall Iliif, and Brian Sullivan. Submit your bird sightings at ebird.org.

Feathered forecasters

Just-arrived warblers abandoned breeding grounds before severe storm blew in

Birds' abilities to sense approaching storms and imminent earthquakes are not understood well, but it's clear they're better than our own.

Banders in southern Israel, for example, reported that gulls and herons took wing just before a 7.2-magnitude earthquake struck in 1995 ("Since You Asked," June 2010), while a Marbled Godwit wearing a satellite transmitter flew from Baja California to Texas and back, apparently to avoid Hurricane John in 2006. Now, thanks to researchers led by Henry Streby of the University of California Berkeley, we know that songbirds, too, are acutely aware of coming bad weather.

In 2013, he and his team equipped 20 male Golden-winged Warblers that nest in eastern Tennessee with miniature light-level geolocators. He later recovered backpacks from five birds.

Each spent the winter in Colombia and arrived on breeding territories between April 13 and April 27, 2014, just as a powerful weather system started to move east through the central and southern United States. The storm would spawn 84 tornadoes and kill 35 people, but, as Streby writes in the January 5 issue of *Current Biology*, the warblers eluded it.

One to two days before it hit, each bird abandoned its territory and flew south to the Gulf Coast, over 400 miles away. The warblers returned May 1-2, after the storm had passed, and promptly resumed defending territories. Most likely, Streby suggests, the birds were tipped off by ultra-low-frequency sound waves produced by the advancing storm.

TABLET EXTRAS

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YEAR IN REVIEW

Last year's 50 most important stories about birds and birdwatchers.

CRANE KILLED

Another Whooping Crane, a female in Louisiana, has been shot.

OWL PHOTOS

Seven Snowy Owls photographed this winter.

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Secret life of birds



SWEET TREAT: At sap holes on a well-drilled tree, a male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker holds a bug in its bill just before dipping it in sap. The bird then flew with the snack into nearby woods, probably to feed to its nestlings.

(continued from page 10)

solitary jays impersonating hawks when apparently I was the only audience.

Since jays often produce the calls when they're excited, I may have unknowingly been near a nest (and perhaps appeared to the jay to be susceptible of being scared by a hawk). A more mundane explanation is that jays just mimic sounds they hear, and hawk calls are similar enough to jays' other standard sounds that they are an easy addition to their vocal array.

Is it true that you can tell the sex of a Wild Turkey by the shape of its droppings? — Greta Wilson, Indianapolis, Indiana

Yes, fresh turkey droppings can often be used to determine if the producer was male or female. Male turkey poop tends to be elongated or J-shaped, while the female's is like a spiral blob, more or less similar to a snail's shell. The contrasting configurations arise from the different internal anatomy of male and female turkeys. Many anatomical differences are common to all birds, but the males of some species, including turkeys, have a rudimentary internal sex organ. Since the structure is located close to the waste stream, it may influence the shape of droppings.

Send a question

Send your question to ask@birdwatchingdaily.com or visit www.BirdWatchingDaily.com and look for "Contact us." Or write to: BirdWatching Since You Asked, 25 Braintree Hill Office Park, Suite 404, Braintree, MA 02184

PHOTO GALLERY

Recent rare-bird sightings in North America



Rick Fridell

FIRST IN NEVADA: This Couch's Kingbird, a tropical flycatcher, was spotted in January at Clark County Wetlands Park in Las Vegas.



Deborah Allen

FIRST IN NEW YORK: This Couch's Kingbird was seen in parks and neighborhoods in Manhattan's West Village from early November to early January.



Craig Watson

THIRD IN SOUTH CAROLINA: On January 17, this Crested Caracara was observed for a few hours at a bird-conservation center north of Charleston.



Ram Papish

FIRST IN OREGON: This Tundra Bean-Goose spent the winter near the Pacific coast at Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Hotspot Near You No. 127).



Jackie Bowman

FIRST IN MISSOURI, THIRD IN ILLINOIS: In January, this Ivory Gull was seen on both sides of the Mississippi River at Quincy, Illinois.



Robert Lewis

FIFTH IN CALIFORNIA: This Rustic Bunting, a Eurasian songbird, was seen in December and January at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Festivals + events

Fun things to do in March and April

March 5-8

San Diego Bird Festival
Mission Bay Park,
San Diego, California

March 5-8

Vallarta Bird Festival
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

March 11-15

Big "O" Birding Festival
LaBelle, Florida

March 13-15

Wings over Water Northwest
Birding Festival
Blaine, Washington

March 14

Pelican Island Wildlife Festival
Sebastian, Florida

March 15-22

Eilat Birds Festival
Eilat, Israel

March 19-22

Audubon's Nebraska
Crane Festival
Kearney, Nebraska

March 27-29

Othello Sandhill Crane Festival
Othello, Washington

April 9-12

Galveston FeatherFest
and Nature PhotoFest
Galveston Island, Texas

April 10-12

Olympic Peninsula BirdFest
Sequim, Washington

April 11-12

Attwater's Prairie-Chicken
Festival
Eagle Lake, Texas

April 15-21

Godwit Days
Arcata, California

April 15-22

Lek Treks and More Lesser
Prairie-Chicken Festival
Woodward, Oklahoma

April 17-19

Grand Isle Migratory
Bird Celebration
Thibodaux, Louisiana

April 22-26

Florida's Birding and
Photo Fest
St. Augustine, Florida

April 23-25

Great Dismal Swamp
Birding Festival
Great Dismal Swamp NWR,
North Carolina and Virginia

April 23-26

Verde Valley Birding and
Nature Festival
Cottonwood, Arizona

April 24-25

Wings 'N' Wetlands Festival
Great Bend, Kansas

April 24-26

Chipola Feather Fest
Marianna, Florida

April 24-26

Point Reyes Birding and
Nature Festival
Point Reyes, California

April 24-26

Wings over the Hills
Nature Festival
Fredericksburg, Texas

April 24-27

Balcones Songbird Festival
Balcones Canyonlands
NWR, Texas

April 27-May 2

New River Birding and
Nature Festival
Fayetteville, West Virginia

April 29-May 3

Waders in Working Wetlands:
Shorebird Extravaganza
Jennings, Louisiana

April 30-May 3

Orcas Island BirdFest
Eastsound, Washington

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FALCON-LIKE: A Juvenile Cooper's Hawk flies low in a set-winged glide.

Misidentifications are best

Why you gain when you get them wrong

Misidentifying a bird doesn't end the game; it just resets the board for the next match. Last autumn, I gained two insights from misidentifications that will serve me in the future.

The first boo-boo occurred on my regular Monday-morning birdwalk in Cape May, New Jersey. It was late October, raptor primetime, and I spotted a low-flying raptor coming straight for us in a set-winged glide. My initial assessment was Peregrine Falcon. The size and wingspan were right, but something prompted me to hold my breath, so I did not blurt out the name. Passing seconds underscored the

wisdom of my decision, as the presumed Peregrine Falcon morphed into a perfectly identifiable Cooper's Hawk.

OK, technically, I can't be charged with a misidentification, but all the same, my initial identification was wrong. And the fact that I chose not to use binoculars during the analysis is no excuse; having studied thousands of raptors, I felt pretty confident about that Peregrine call, binocular-deprived or no.

What I'd just learned is that the wingspans of Cooper's Hawk and Peregrine Falcon are deceptively similar. Discoveries of this sort are what keep birding interesting.

A different approach

Read an excerpt from Kevin Karlson and Dale Rosselet's new book, *Peterson Reference Guide to Birding by Impression*, page 26.

The reason this particular mis-assessment stuck in my mind is that, six days later, I fumbled a different but similar identification in front of 60 witnesses.

As part of the annual autumn bird festival, photographer and author Kevin Karlson and I were co-leading a special identification-centric fieldtrip at Cape May Point State Park, the 235-acre park at the southern tip of the peninsula. Clearing skies prompted a number of raptors to get up simultaneously. Once again, and without binoculars, I picked up a bird in a set-winged glide approaching head-on. The size, shape, and demeanor seemed right for Cooper's Hawk. (It would have been our first for the morning.)

"Cooper's Hawk over the bunker!" I shouted. This proved to be wrong, but where I really erred was by failing to follow up my initial determination with continued study.

Kevin was more attentive. Very rightfully but somewhat apologetically, he called my attention and that of the group back to the bird, which was now right over our heads and offering a profile silhouette — a juvenile Broad-winged Hawk. "Sorry, Pete," he intoned.

But there was nothing to feel sorry about. I'd blown the call, and Kevin had corrected me. Better that than sow confusion among the group.

So in less than a week, I had learned that the head-on appearances of Peregrine, Cooper's Hawk, and Broad-winged — a falcon, an accipiter, and a buteo — can be deceptively similar. So similar that even a person who has written books on raptor identification could be fooled. This is an invaluable insight for the small price of a moment's embarrassment.

As I love to point out when introducing my birding classes, the difference

between a beginning birder and an experienced one is that beginners have thus far misidentified very few birds, while experienced birders have misidentified thousands.

It's the price birders pay for experience. Everyone antes up. The fact is, and as the title of this article suggests, I learn more about identification from the birds I misidentify than the ones I name correctly.

When an experienced birder identifies a bird correctly, that is the norm. It's the misidentifications, the anomalies, that hold the insights that make good birders better birders. So don't shy away from misidentifications; embrace them and learn from them.

So how did I turn a Broad-winged into a Cooper's Hawk? First, by shooting from the hip and not following my initial guess with study. This would have disclosed black wingtips, which accipiters do not show.

But supporting my initial mis-assessment was predisposition. It was mid-morning, a time when Cooper's Hawks are hunting, not migrating. The bird was low, at a hunting height, not high, as were the many migrating Sharp-shinned Hawks and several Broad-winged we'd been seeing.

Moreover, it was an identification-oriented fieldtrip. I was actively searching for a Cooper's Hawk. When a bird showed up whose head-on size and shape were nominally consistent with the species, I took the bait.

Luckily, Kevin was there to correct me, thus giving me an insight I would otherwise have missed.

I can't say for certain that I will never misidentify a head-on Cooper's Hawk again, but I can say that I'll approach the challenge with more caution.

On to the next match. 🐦

Pete Dunne is New Jersey Audubon's birding ambassador at-large. He is the co-author of *Hawks in Flight: The Flight Identification of North American Raptors* (2nd edition) and the author of *The Art of Bird Identification: A Straightforward Approach to Putting a Name to the Bird* and other books about birds.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Winter Texan Chili Dinner
Matagorda County Fair,
Livestock Show, & PRCA Rodeo
Matagorda Beach Clean-up
Valentine's Day Parade & Dance

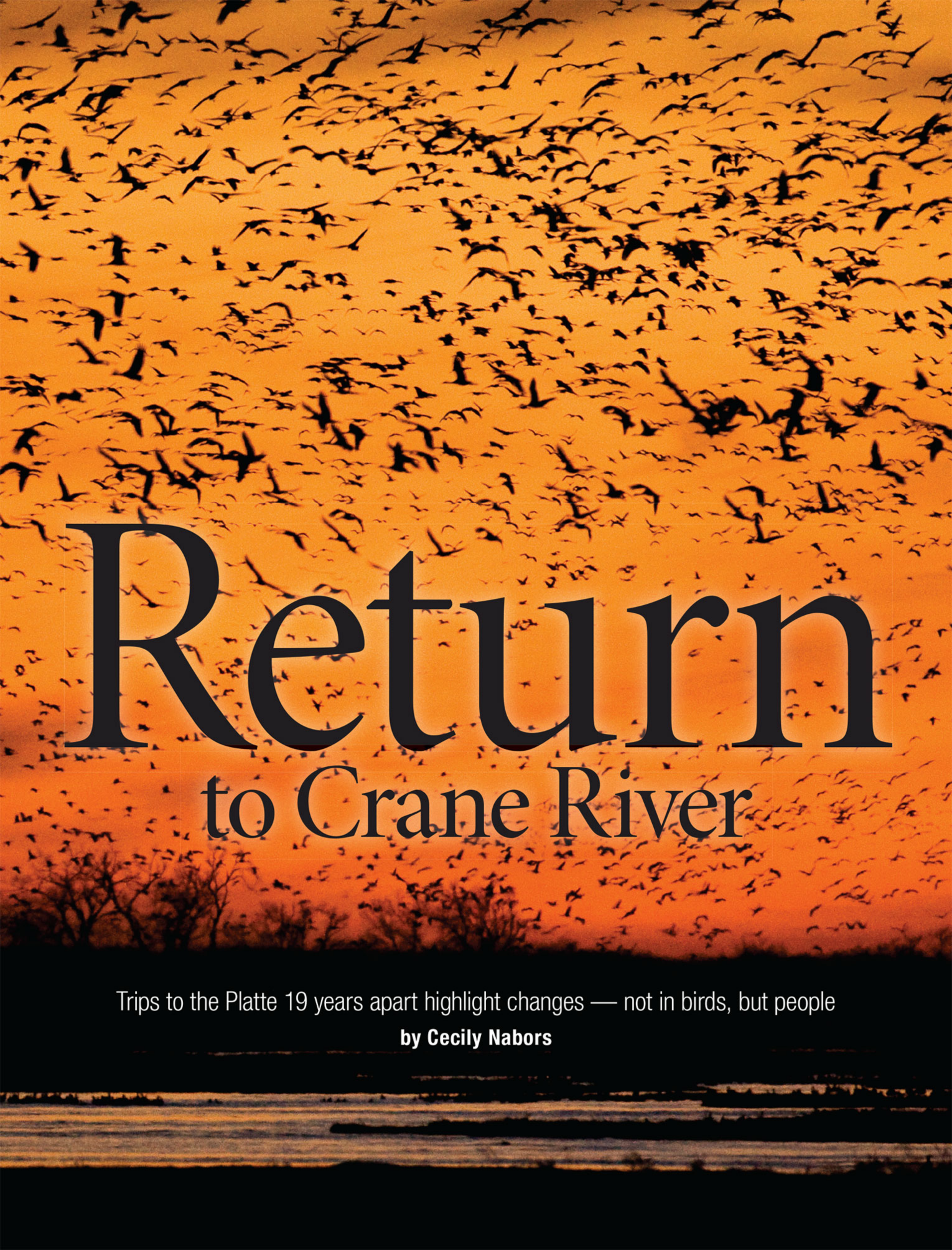


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A large flock of birds, likely Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese, is captured in flight against a warm, orange-hued sky at sunset. The birds are silhouetted against the bright light, creating a dense pattern of dark shapes across the upper two-thirds of the frame. Below the birds, a dark, silhouetted horizon line separates the sky from the ground. The ground appears to be a flat, open area, possibly a river or a field, with some darker patches of vegetation or water visible in the foreground.

IN THE FIELD

SPECTACULAR: Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese fill the March sky
as the sun sets over the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska.



Return to Crane River

Trips to the Platte 19 years apart highlight changes — not in birds, but people

by Cecily Nabors

In corn-stubble fields on both sides of Nebraska's Highway 30 stood hundreds of tall birds, gray feather dusters on stilts. Some foraged for kernels dropped during last fall's harvest, still more stood about as if gossiping, while others jumped and flapped in impromptu dances.

I wanted to cheer. I was looking at exactly what I had come to see: migrating Sandhill Cranes staging along the Platte River. It was as exciting last spring as it had been the first time I traveled to Nebraska, 19 years earlier. The thrill was the same, but the experience was different.

I made my first pilgrimage with a birding group in March 1995. Then, when we told a lunchtime waitress we were birdwatchers, she gave us a puzzled smile. "Cranes have been coming twice a year, and we just thought, 'Well, there are those big, obnoxious birds again,'" she said. "And now, lots of people come here to see them."

The surprise in her voice echoed the reaction we'd seen before: astonishment

that people would travel a thousand miles to see those "obnoxious birds."

In March 2014, I went back for a week to relive the experience and to see what had changed in the intervening years. On the second trip, when our group entered a restaurant or store, we didn't have to open our mouths; someone was sure to ask, "Are you here for the birds?"

When we said yes, the questioner would often launch into a proud and personal story about the cranes. Or someone would ask us where we were from, as if we earned points for being from faraway places.

The cranes were the same; the people had changed.

The Audubon Naturalist Society, based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, sponsored both trips. To see the cranes, our group traveled about 1,300 miles from the Washington, D.C., area.

That's nothing for the cranes. To get to their breeding grounds every spring, they leave their winter homes in the southwestern United States and Mexico and fly north as far as Alaska or even

Siberia. That distance can be more than 4,000 miles.

On my first trip, a docent with the Crane Meadows Nature Center told me, "They start coming in on Valentine's Day, peak on Saint Patrick's Day, and are gone on Tax Day." (The nature center, located along the river south of Alda, is now known as the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center.) Following their millennia-old route, the cranes stop at the Platte, a winding thread of riparian habitat in what was tallgrass prairie but is now a sea of corn, to rest and build up fat reserves for the next stage of their trip. They even sleep in the Platte. Broad and shallow, the river braids through sandbars and islets, providing safe overnight accommodations.

Last March, as we approached the river valley along I-80 from Lincoln, in the southeastern corner of the state, I worried about the cranes. In the previous two years, serious drought had plagued the Midwest. Land-use and water issues were dominating habitat problems for birds in the West; cranes and other birds

FEATHERED ISLAND: Safe in the shallow Platte, a Sandhill Crane adjusts its plumage.





were losing suitable habitat as more prairie was plowed under and more water was diverted for irrigation and development. Many of the ponds and prairie potholes that millions of migrating waterfowl and Snow Geese depend on were dry. The Platte, so valuable for wildlife, was being called upon more and more to serve the needs of people. The area had become so dry that we saw few waterfowl. Little whirlwinds lifted cornhusks into mini-tornadoes. Would the cranes be safe?

I needn't have worried. About four miles from the city of Grand Island, we saw the first great swirling clouds of circling cranes. Then we saw them in the fields and heard the first *Garrooo*, the cranes' hollow gurgling music. Our van filled with smiles and joyful exclamations. The wary birds stayed far from the road, but our scopes brought in their red foreheads, rapier bills, and long, sturdy legs.

Over the next few days, we traversed the Big Bend, that part of the river between Grand Island and Lexington, farther west, where conditions still favor the cranes. Even here, development and other human actions were more pervasive than on my first trip, but the cranes seemed unaffected. Hal Wierenga, our trip leader, agreed. He's an ornithological consultant who has led seven trips to the Platte and Nebraska's Sandhill Country. He told us the crane numbers have stayed fairly stable in the 25 years he's been coming here. Sandhills are hunted for food in winter in many states, and they don't breed until they're four or five years old, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that about half a million birds still migrate through the middle of the continent.

Most wet meadows that once bordered the Platte have been drained for agriculture. Fewer frogs, snails, and small fish are available as protein-rich crane food, but the birds have adapted, gleaning corn

left in the fields. New harvesters will be more efficient than the machines in use today, but the state of Nebraska may then pay farmers to leave more corn, as is done in national wildlife refuges. A coalition of

the Nature Conservancy, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and Ducks Unlimited is recreating wetlands in the Platte River Valley — a benefit to cranes and waterfowl.

The service monitors the river's flow. Shortly after my trip, enough water was released from reservoirs to cause a flow of 700 cubic feet per

second in the Platte. This would ensure protection of the standing birds at night.

Local interest has increased. At places like the 1,900-acre Lillian Annette Rowe Bird Sanctuary, commonly known as the Rowe Sanctuary, between Grand Island and Kearney, volunteers help the professionals scour the sandbar islands. Ridding the islands of non-native invasives and woody plants saves roosting sites for the cranes.

On both trips, watching cranes come to the river in the evening was a delight. As we stood on a bridge over the Platte south of Alda, cranes in their hundreds halloped overhead, sailed in graceful curves above us, and drifted down to the safe harbor of the river. Exotic patterns formed like a constantly shifting calligraphy as skein after skein of cranes floated down to the sandbars.

Looking upriver, we gazed at a beautiful sunset enhanced by crane silhouettes. Looking downriver, we watched cranes descend like paratroopers, wings cupped and legs dangling, to join the others on the sandbars and in the shallows. (In "Amazing Birds" in February 2015, Founding Editor Eldon Greij described how cranes and other big birds land so softly.) Feathered islands in the Platte, the birds kept up a constant barrage of sound, something like huge truck tires spinning on distant highways.

"Cranes have been coming twice a year, and we just thought, 'Well, there are those big, obnoxious birds again.'"

An even less common crane

Whooping Crane isn't the only rare crane that occasionally travels with Nebraska's Sandhill Cranes. Common Crane, a Eurasian species, has also been found, and so regularly that it's now thought to be annual. The state's last report was in April 2014, when one was discovered in a group of 2,000 Sandhills near Elm Creek, a town between Kearney and Lexington. Birders reported individual Common Cranes eight months later in west Texas and New Mexico, adding fuel to speculation that Common Cranes spotted in interior North America probably joined populations of Lesser Sandhills on their breeding grounds in northeastern Asia and then accompanied them to and from their wintering areas.

When Sandhills migrate

Sandhill Cranes that migrate through Nebraska are members of the Mid-Continent Population. They spend the winter in southeastern Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and central and northern Mexico and breed in Canada and northwestern Minnesota and as far away as western Alaska and southeastern Asia.

The cranes depart their wintering areas between late February and early March and arrive at the North Platte and Platte River valleys in late February. Numbers peak from mid- to late March.

The birds depart Nebraska from early to mid-April and arrive at nesting areas in Manitoba in late April, in Alaska from early to mid-May, and in Siberia no sooner than early May.

Travel info

Where to find more information about organizations and events mentioned in this article.

➤ **CRANE TRUST INC.**

Wood River

<http://www.cranetrust.org>

➤ **CRANE TRUST NATURE AND VISITOR CENTER**

Interstate 80, Exit 305, Alda

<http://nebraskanature.org>

➤ **LILLIAN ANNETTE ROWE BIRD SANCTUARY**

4450 Elm Island Rd., Gibbon

<http://rowe.audubon.org>

➤ **AUDUBON'S NEBRASKA CRANE FESTIVAL**

Kearney, March 19-22

<http://nebraskacranefestival.org>

➤ **ANNUAL MIDWEST CRANE COUNT**

Wisconsin and portions of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota, April 18,

5:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. CDT

<https://www.savingcranes.org/>

annual-midwest-crane-count.html

While some drivers may be annoyed by crane-watchers clogging their roads, I noticed that many locals now seem more aware of the lucrative business the huge photogenic birds bring their way. Ecotourism isn't a feature of the African plains only; cranes generate America's own amazing migration spectacle, drawing thousands of visitors a year. The annual spring onslaught of crane-watchers injects an estimated \$11 million into Nebraska's economy.

In addition to the state's increased conservation efforts, facilities for observing cranes have been improved greatly since my first visit. The towns along the Platte and the several visitor centers have added to and upgraded their blinds and educational displays.

The beautiful nature and visitor center operated by the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, better known as the Crane Trust, is a good example. Built by Crane Meadows in 2004 and called the Nebraska Nature and Visitor Center between 2009 and 2011, it provides blinds at locations along the river from which we could feast our

eyes on Sandhills and hope for an occasional Whooping Crane as well.

The Crane Trust was founded in 1978 to preserve land along the Platte to benefit wild Whoopers as they migrate between Texas and Canada. So it's ironic that Whooping Crane numbers in recent years have been higher along the Loup River, a northern tributary that joins the Platte south of Columbus, because too many people are now in the Platte River Valley.

A talk about the cranes was scheduled, but a local television station was interviewing our speaker, another indication of increased interest in the Platte phenomenon.

Instead, Karen Krull Robart, a Crane Trust spokesperson, told us about Bob, a famous Whooping Crane that has traveled with Sandhill Cranes for the last four years. She said she had nicknamed the bird after her brother, who had a tendency to get lost. It's a shame that the crane is running with the wrong crowd, Robart explained, because he won't mate successfully.

As sunset approached, we walked down the trail to a new blind with tiered

seating, large windows that could be hooked open, and a great view of Sandhill Cranes descending to the river's sandbars. We were told another blind was downstream, a VIP blind that Jane Goodall, the famous English primatologist, would use the next night. Goodall has made witnessing the migration an annual tradition. "Nebraska is special to

me," she has said.

"I've traveled far and wide, and coming to Nebraska and seeing and hearing the cranes always restores my soul." Amen, Dr. Goodall.

Three Crane Trust docents accompanied us. We had to stay in the blind until dark, so our exit wouldn't alarm the wary

cranes. They prefer the least disturbed areas of the river, making observation blinds like this a valuable part of the sanctuary. Braided rivers tend to be deeper at the edges than in the middle, so the cranes are seldom menaced by foxes or bobcats. "But I've seen deer walk right through the birds with no problem," one of the docents said, laughing. At seven o'clock, cranes were already



COMPANIONS: A gray Sandhill leads a white Whooping Crane along the Platte in March 2009.

Stan Tekiela

PLENTY FOR ALL: Hungry cranes take advantage of corn left in a Nebraska field.

Melissa Grop

crowding the sandbars in the middle of the river. More drifted down, somehow slotting themselves into the group. The standing birds all faced into the wind.

Many were drinking, tilting their heads back to let the water trickle down their long throats. Some bathed, ducking down into the current, swishing their feathery bustles. Occasionally, a crane lost its footing and was washed, flailing and splashing, a few feet downstream before scrambling up again. Through the open windows, we could hear the continuous calls. Ornithologist Paul Johnsgard, emeritus professor at the University of Nebraska and a long-time student of the crane family, aptly titled one of his books *Crane Music* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Crane music: the wild primeval voices of thousands of cranes.

We scanned the cranes in search of Bob the lost Whooping Crane. We knew he

would be a bit taller and a lot whiter than the Sandhills, but, sadly, we failed to find him. The setting sun gilded the scene as more and more cranes descended to the river, crowding into their chosen areas. We watched until darkness swallowed river and birds.

Another favorite activity on both trips

was observing morning liftoff. The birds seemed in no hurry but lingered in the river as if enjoying the dawn chorus of meadowlarks and cardinals. One day, an eagle flew upstream, causing hundreds of cranes to leap into the air, shouting. Other days, when there was no reason for alarm, small groups would dance a few steps on the sandbar and then take off. Juvenile voices mixed with those of their parents, piccolos among bugles.

At Kearney (pronounced KAR-nee), where a museum and reconstructed buildings commemorated the early Fort Kearny, a docent told us that Bob the Whooping Crane had been

sighted by premier Nebraska ornithologist Gary Lingle. This was good news, as Lingle had served for years as the Crane Trust's avian ecologist and habitat manager. He was also the author of the classic guide *Birding Crane River: Nebraska's Platte* (Harrier, 1994). He would know Bob if anyone would. It was a relief to learn that Bob had returned.

After a sojourn north through Nebraska's Sandhills (where one will never see a Sandhill Crane except in flight), we came back down to the Platte at Lexington. Snow swirled around the vans as we headed to Lincoln for our flights home. Sandhill Cranes were still feeding in fields along the Platte. Through the gauze curtain of blowing snowflakes, the sight of two cranes bowing to each other seemed a mystical promise of continuance. 🦢

Cecily Nabors is the coordinator of the Natural History Field Studies program co-sponsored by the Audubon Naturalist Society. A freelance writer, she has published more than 100 stories and articles for adults and children in the Washington Post and other publications. For several years, she wrote the column "Observations" for the Audubon Naturalist News. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

TABLET EXTRAS

Tap the links below to learn more about Sandhill Cranes in Nebraska.

SANDHILL CRANE

Read the International Crane Foundation's profile of the species.

CRANE CAM

Enjoy live video of Sandhill Cranes at the Rowe Sanctuary.

BUGLING

Listen to Sandhill Crane calls.

CRANES IN MOTION

Watch videos of Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River.

CRANE GALLERY

View reader photos of Sandhill Crane.

HOW BIRDS LAND

Eldon Greij describes how cranes and other big birds land so softly.

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A yard like
no other



THE VIEW: From an observation deck above his roof, Jim Stevenson of Galveston Island, Texas, can scan the treetops in his record-breaking yard, neighboring green fields, and Galveston Bay. Stevenson (below) is a lifelong birder and the founder of the Galveston Ornithological Society.



Jim Stevenson

The special ingredients that made a one-time cattle pen attract more birds than any other yard in North America

by Matt Mendenhall, Managing Editor

Successful yard listing — keeping track of the bird species that you see in or from your yard — requires two things: awareness of what birds are present or passing through, and the know-how to create habitats that will attract a wide variety of visitors.

More than 10,000 birders keep track of yard lists on the checklist website eBird, and the National Wildlife Federation has registered more than

175,000 Certified Wildlife Habitats across America. (See “Tablet Extras,” page 25.) Clearly, lots of people have the awareness and know-how to maintain yard lists.

A few property owners, however, have a special ingredient that has helped their lists grow fast: location. Living in a place where many birds come and go has clear benefits. Homeowners in Marin County, California, Corpus Christi, Texas, and

Pensacola, Florida, have lists exceeding 280 species, says field-guide consultant and tour leader Paul Lehman. He should know. From 1994 to 2006, he amassed 316 species, an unofficial North American yard-list record, while living in another place well known for its birds — Cape May, New Jersey.

The mark stood until 2014, when a Gray Kingbird and later a Fish Crow were spotted in a yard on Galveston Island,

Highlights of Heartbreak Hammock

- Prime location on Galveston Island
- Elevation 14 feet above sea level
- Trees such as cherry laurels, mulberries, Hercules club, peach, plum, and several oaks
- A fresh-water drip for thirsty birds
- Nesting Painted Buntings, Great Horned Owls, and Crested Caracaras
- A nearby lagoon and cattle pastures that attract lots of species
- An elevated deck for viewing high-flying raptors and other birds

Latest additions to the yard list

FISH CROW
August 2014

GRAY KINGBIRD
April 2014

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL
September 2013

BROAD-BILLED HUMMINGBIRD
November 2012

SONG SPARROW
February 2012

RUSTY BLACKBIRD
December 2011

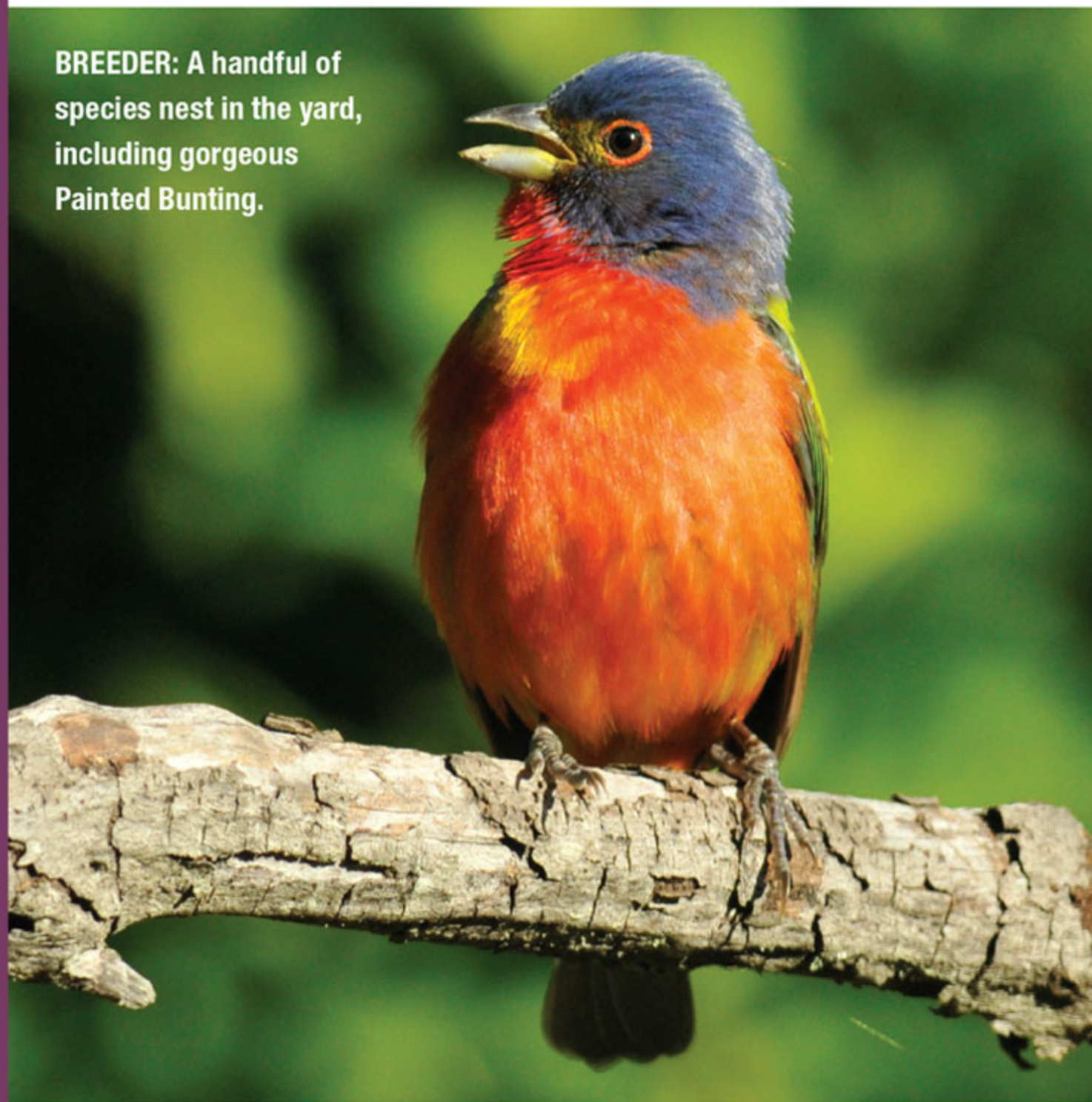
ANHINGA
September 2011

MACGILLIVRAY'S WARBLER
September 2009

COMMON PAURAQUE
May 2009

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER
April 2009

BREEDER: A handful of species nest in the yard, including gorgeous Painted Bunting.



“Stevenson’s yard has attracted several species that are out of range on the Upper Texas Coast, including Bell’s and Cassin’s Vireos, MacGillivray’s Warbler, and Gray Kingbird.”

Texas, a stone’s throw from the Gulf of Mexico. The sightings raised Jim Stevenson’s list to 318 species. You may have heard of him, or his father: A lifelong birder, Stevenson is an author, a birding guide, and the founder of the Galveston Ornithological Society. (Dad was Henry M. Stevenson, an ornithologist at Florida State University, a research fellow at the Tall Timbers Research Station in Tallahassee, and the co-author of *The Birdlife of Florida*.)

Stevenson’s home is on what he calls “the edge of a failed subdivision” on the western side of the island. Today it’s like living in a wildlife refuge, he says, but it wasn’t always so birdy.

Once it was a cattle pasture, part of which was bulldozed in the 1950s to create a 14-foot-high butte where cows could be driven in case of hurricanes. The cattle pen later became a research plot for ornithology students.

Stevenson mist-netted birds there in the 1980s, while he was writing his Master’s thesis on migration in the Gulf states. He bought the two-acre property

in 1995 and has kept a yard list since March 1996.

When he moved in, the yard had lots of non-native chinaberry trees and, on the south side, cherry laurels, which produce fruit that attracts birds. “Over the years, I have replaced many chinaberries with fruiting trees,” he says. “The cherry laurels have spread north and now surround the yard with their dense foliage. I have also planted bird-attracting trees such as mulberries, Hercules club, peaches, a wonderful plum tree, and several oaks that *really* bring in the birds.”

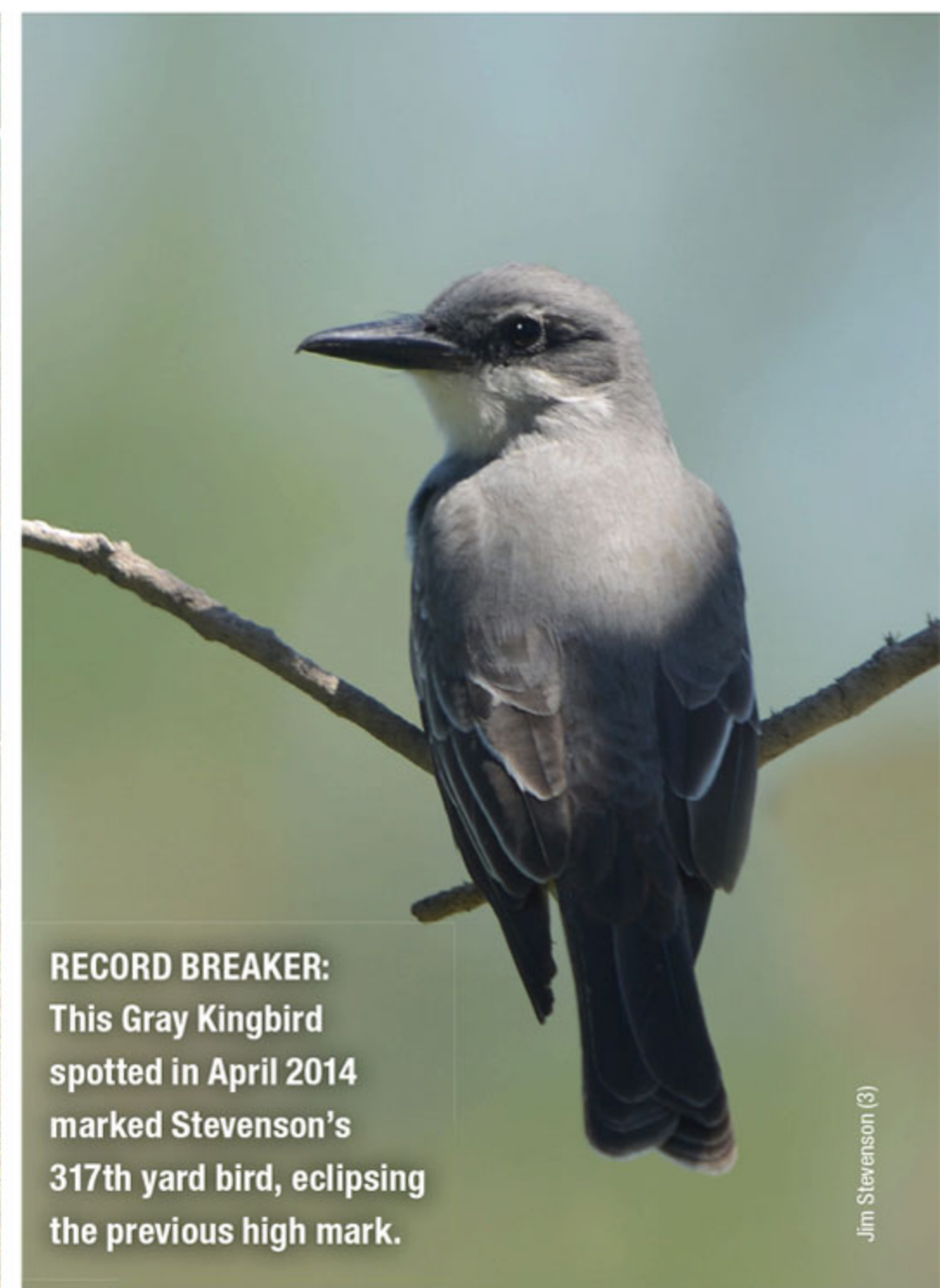
Additional factors that make Stevenson’s yard a magnet for birds:

- Location: Galveston Island lies on the spring or fall path for almost all eastern migrants, and it attracts a fair number of western stragglers. Birds that make the long flight across the Gulf find refuge in Stevenson’s yard.

- The neighborhood: Few other homes are nearby. Cattle pastures to the east attract wintering Sandhill Cranes, migrating sandpipers, and nesting



LIKE A WILDLIFE REFUGE: A thick mix of cherry laurels, mulberries, and other trees surround Stevenson's home. His sky deck projects above the far right corner of the roof.



RECORD BREAKER: This Gray Kingbird spotted in April 2014 marked Stevenson's 317th yard bird, eclipsing the previous high mark.

Jim Stevenson (3)

Northern Harriers. To the west, a large artificial lagoon brings rails, ducks, and surprises like Yellow-headed Blackbird.

- **Elevation:** The butte sits above sea level, so its trees and other plants are higher than the salty Gulf air and beyond the reach of foliage- and fruit-damaging salt spray.

- **The view:** An observation deck towers above the house, enabling Stevenson to see waterbirds and raptors migrating along the Gulf coast.

- **Fresh water:** Stevenson has run a long black hose from the house along a tree limb and over rocks to a flat wooden box. When the weather is warm, birds come in for a drink. The drip is visible from inside through a set of windows.

"Nothing comes through my yard without me seeing it," he says.

Stevenson's yard has attracted several species that are out of range on the Upper Texas Coast, including Bell's and Cassin's Vireos, MacGillivray's Warbler, and the Gray Kingbird he found in 2014. He has also documented the near-annual occurrence of Western Wood-Pewee, proving to the Texas Bird Records Committee that the species can be found east of the Great Plains.

Another rarity? Bird feeders. Stevenson occasionally puts out hummingbird feeders, and he'll use a seed feeder in winter if goldfinches or

other seedeaters are around, but most of the time, birds find only natural food in the yard.

Stevenson welcomes birders and other visitors. Brian Small and Alan Murphy, two of North America's top bird photographers, have stopped in every spring for about 15 years to shoot and lead workshops.

Small's photos appear in "ID Tips" in every issue of *BirdWatching* (see page 38), and Murphy is a frequent contributor to the magazine. "The excitement of never knowing what may show up on any given day keeps bringing us back for more," Small says.

The yard is also a destination during the annual Galveston FeatherFest and Nature PhotoFest; this year, the festival takes place April 9-12.

If you visit, you might notice that Stevenson has named his yard Heart-break Hammock, a bit of a downer for a place so rich in birdlife. He says the story behind the moniker is this:

"Back in the 1980s, I brought my high-school zoology students out from Florida to study birds, and we erected mist nets for banding. When we went to lunch, a woman came on the property, and thinking we were somehow injuring the birds, she tore down the nets, destroying them. The kids were heart-broken, and the name stuck." 🐦

TABLET EXTRAS

Tap the links below to learn more about Jim Stevenson's yard and attracting birds to your own.

5 YARDS THAT BIRDS LOVE

Read about yards in Minnesota, California, and other states.

ATTRACTING BIRDS

Read Laura Erickson's columns about how to draw birds to your yard.

YARD LISTS

Track your totals and compare with others on eBird.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

How to certify your yard for wildlife.

GALVESTON

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Learn about birding in Galveston County, and find directions to Stevenson's yard.

GALVESTON FEATHERFEST

The island's annual spring bird festival.

No tablet? Find a link to all Tablet Extras at www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/the-magazine/current-issue

Sparrows by *impression*

The authors of a new Peterson Reference Guide describe a novel way to identify those “little brown jobs”

by Kevin T. Karlson and Dale Rosselet

SPARROWS ARE THE BIRDS responsible for the popular phrase “little brown jobs,” or LBJs. Their predominately brown plumage, small size, and mostly shy nature create ID problems for many birders, although recent attention to differences in size and structure have eased some of this confusion.

TIPS FOR VIEWING SPARROWS

The best way to find sparrows is to look for them in appropriate habitats, especially fields and brushy areas. While this may sound overly simple, it is because sparrows can be secretive and easily overlooked, especially in winter. Large feeding flocks in fall and winter may contain many species, providing great opportunities for direct comparisons of similar sparrows.

Initial encounters with sparrows can be unnerving. Many birders have painful memories of small, brown, ground-hugging birds disappearing into dense grass or brush at the slightest noise or

disruptive movement. Typical comments include “They all look the same!” and “How will I ever get a good look at these birds?” A good starting point is to become familiar with species you might see before venturing into the field.

MINIMIZE YOUR PRESENCE IN THE FIELD:

Wear muted, earth-tone clothing to minimize your presence, and take your time. Walk slowly and quietly through the grass, stopping often to allow sparrows to get used to your

presence. Keep your binoculars raised to your chin when stalking sparrows, so you don’t lose precious time raising your binoculars; sparrows need only a few seconds to slip away.

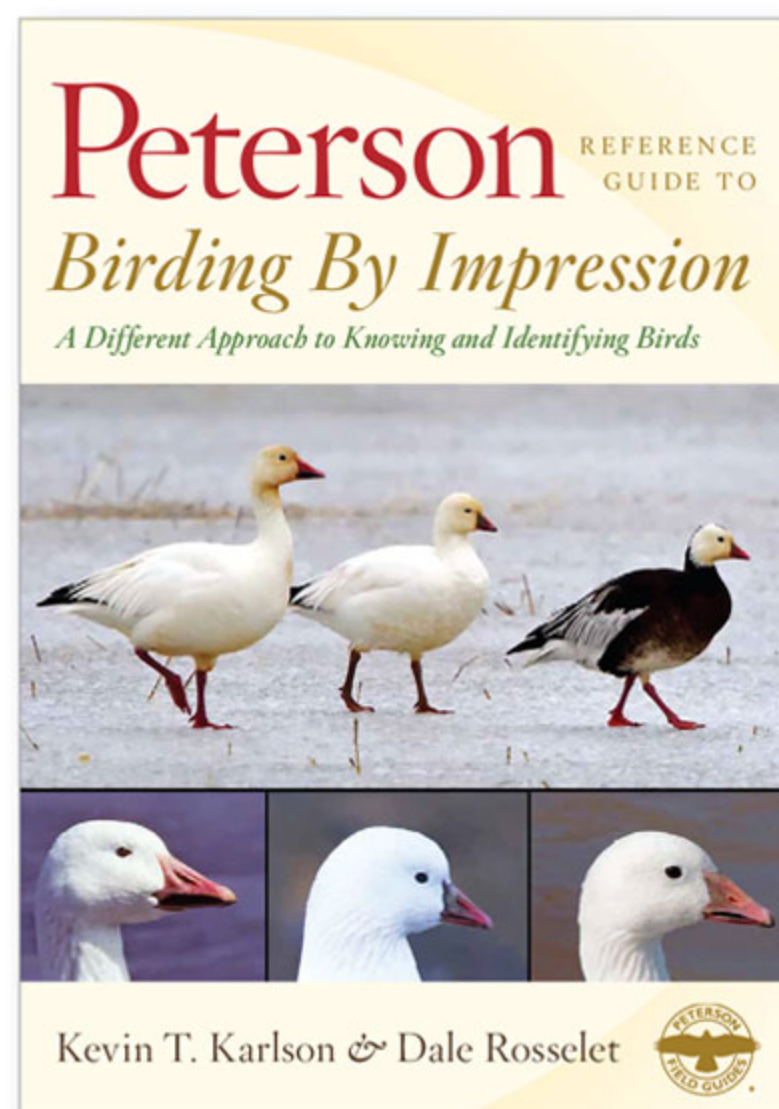
When sparrows flush, watch their retreat to a general area. Then scan the bushes or grass tops for perched birds. After a while, they usually return to the ground a bit farther away and begin feeding again. Now approach them slowly and repeat the process.

COAXING SPARROWS TO YOU: After locating sparrows and positioning yourself for good looks, try quietly “pishing” or “squeaking” to get them to perch in the open. “Pishing” is done by pushing air through a narrow opening in your lips with a short air burst using the letters “pssh.” Squeaking is accomplished by pressing your lips on the back of your hand and drawing air into your mouth in short bursts, which creates a high, squeaking sound. Both of these sounds mimic birds’ distress calls and often cause sparrows to come out of cover to see what the fuss is about.

Another way to view sparrows is to place some bird seed near the edge of a thicket or woodland. If sparrows or other seed-eating birds are present, they will soon venture into the open near the edge to feed. This simple strategy works well during spring and fall migration, and even better during winter, when sparrows have established feeding territories. After a few days, even shy birds come to feed with the group.

PHYSICAL PROFILE

Sparrows have a variety of body shapes, from compact and rounded to elongated and slender. All have short, conical bills of varying thicknesses and strong legs and feet. (See photos, pages 28-29.) Members of each genus share a fairly consistent variety of structural features.





IMPRESSIONS: Savannah Sparrow's yellowish eyebrow isn't the only fieldmark that distinguishes it from Lincoln's and Song. Its body structure, head, bill, and tail are also distinctive.



LOOK-ALIKE BIRDS

A number of unrelated species resemble sparrows.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD, FEMALE: This bird is often mistaken for a sparrow because of its heavily streaked appearance and pointed bill. Larger than most sparrows, it walks (not hops) on the ground and forms large flocks in swamps, marshes, and wetlands.

INDIGO BUNTING, FEMALE AND IMMATURE: This sparrowlike bunting feeds in brushy fields alongside sparrows, but it has a heavy, conical bill and flies strongly with a characteristic buzzy call when flushed. It also calls when perched, often in the open.

BOBOLINK, FEMALE AND IMMATURE: This small blackbird with sparrowlike streaking has a large, blocky head and pointed wings, and flies strongly when flushed, often with a distinctive, metallic *bink* call note.

HOUSE FINCH, FEMALE (AND OTHER FINCHES): The muted gray- to brown-streaked plumage of some female finches resembles that of sparrows, but most finches differ by having a heavy, conical bill with a curved culmen, and the habit of perching in high, open branches for long periods. Flight and ground calls are also different.

HOUSE SPARROW, FEMALE: This introduced European weaver finch is a common species in North America, and resembles typical sparrows in size and appearance.

BIRDING BY IMPRESSION INFORMATION

SIZE: The 35 species of North American sparrows (including juncos) range in size from Grasshopper, Le Conte's, Henslow's, and Nelson's Sparrows, at 5 in. long (similar to American Goldfinch), to Harris's Sparrow, at 7½ in. long (similar to Brown-headed Cowbird).

Smaller sparrows appear truly diminutive when seen next to the larger ones, with size differences of up

“Even birds that fly away can often be narrowed down to a few possible species because of distinctive structural features.”

to 40 percent. After you've spent some time comparing several different-sized sparrows, you'll have a sense of sizes of various species, even in a brief sighting.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES: After noting distinctive structural features of different sparrows, such as the size and shape of the bill, tail, and head, you should be able to place many sparrows into genus by comparing these shared features. Even birds that fly away can often be narrowed down to a few possible species because of distinctive structural features, such as short, spiky tails versus long, rounded ones, and big, blocky heads and bills versus small, rounded heads and small, pointed bills.

BEHAVIOR: Sparrows are ground-dwelling birds that range from being somewhat tolerant of human presence to being very shy. Most sing on open perches during the breeding season, and many species respond to “pishing” and “squeaking” during migration and in winter.

Sparrows in the same genus often share certain behaviors, and these behaviors and the birds' movements can be helpful clues to their identification. For example, sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus*, such as Le Conte's, Baird's, and Henslow's, are very shy and often hard to see, and run like mice through the grass during their escapes.

Others have distinct flight styles when flushed. Sparrows in the genus *Melospiza* (Song, Lincoln's, and Swamp) fly low when flushed from tall grass. They also briefly cock their tails upward and hold their wings against their bodies for a split second



FOUR GENERA: These four sparrows belong to different genera, and show differences in body shape and structural features. From left to right: Breeding Golden-crowned Sparrow, nonbreeding Swamp Sparrow, “Large-billed” Savannah Sparrow, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Quiz 1

CLAY-COLORED, CHIPPING, AND BREWER’S SPARROWS

All of these sparrows in the genus *Spizella* have a number of similar plumage and structural features. Try to identify these similar birds in nonbreeding plumage. ID information is provided in the text. Answers are on page 31.



during these short escape flights, which adds a recognizable, repeated pause to the overall flight impression and an up-and-down motion to their tails.

Song Sparrow does this regularly and is the easiest to observe engaging in this behavior because of its long, broad tail and slow, deliberate escape flight. The flight style of Lincoln’s Sparrow is not as obvious as Song’s during these flights, and it often flies low and fast to get away. Swamp Sparrows often resemble small, dark, flying mice as they dive into grassy cover during low escape flights.

Savannah Sparrow also has a distinctive flight style when flushed. It flies a good distance in a fast, direct fashion, often twisting its body from side to side during the flight. Recognizing this flight style is helpful, since Savannah often sprints away right after landing.

Juncos are generally tame and easily viewed throughout the year, especially when they form large flocks in winter and feed in open spaces, including at backyard feeders. They often fly as a group into nearby tree cover or dense thickets when flushed instead of running on the ground or diving into tall grass. Vesper Sparrow also regularly flies into tall trees or shrubs during its escape flights, and often sits in the open after landing.

PLUMAGE PATTERNS AND GENERAL COLORATION:

Most sparrows share a muted, earth-tone plumage of brown, gray, and rust, and some have dark streaks on the upperparts and underparts. A handful of

sparrows have rich orange color on their heads and breasts. Eastern Fox Sparrow differs with its rich, rusty overall plumage. Adult juncos are easy to recognize with their gray to black hoods and upperparts, and white bellies.

HABITAT USE: Sparrows are found in a wide variety of habitats, including grasslands, woodland borders, deserts, open spaces, and foothills. Most prefer thickets, tall grasses, or thorny scrub habitats.

VOCALIZATIONS: Sparrows sing a wide variety of songs that include musical notes, trills, staccato chips, and dry hissing sounds. Many species have distinctive calls and chip notes. *Zonotrichia* sparrows (White-crowned, White-throated, and Golden-crowned) sing songs, or variations of them, throughout the year, while some species, such as Song and Fox Sparrows, may start to sing their spring songs on warm, late-winter days.

COMPARISONS OF SIMILAR SPECIES

Clay-colored, Chipping, and Brewer’s Sparrows

Breeding plumage for these three species is fairly distinctive, but immature and winter-plumaged birds pose ID problems.

UNCHANGING CHARACTERISTICS: These three sparrows in the genus *Spizella* are mostly similar in

Quiz 2

NELSON'S SPARROW AND LE CONTE'S SPARROW

These two sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus* are similar in size and share some structural features and plumage patterns. Try to identify these birds using the ID information provided in the text. Answers are on page 31.



“Savannah differs by having a thinner body structure, smaller head and bill, and noticeably shorter, notched tail than both Song and Lincoln’s.”

size, body shape, and structure, though Brewer’s Sparrow has a slightly smaller bill and smaller rounded head. Clay-colored Sparrow averages smaller and smaller-billed than Chipping Sparrow, and more closely resembles Brewer’s.

SUPPLEMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NON-BBI DETAILS: Chipping Sparrow differs from the other two species with its dark versus pale lores, gray versus brownish to buff rump, and muted malar and submustachial stripes versus bold in Clay-colored Sparrow and very thin but defined in Brewer’s Sparrow. Nonbreeding adult Chipping has a reddish-toned crown, but first-winter birds like the one in Quiz 1 show no red at all. Fall and winter Chippings have overall darker upperparts with chestnut tones versus buff and tan upperparts in the other species, although early first-winter Chippings can have upperparts closer in shading to those of Clay-colored and Brewer’s.

Clay-colored shows the boldest dark malar stripe and submustachial markings that highlight a pale malar region, and has the strongest pale median crown stripe as well. Clay-colored typically shows warmer buff-toned underparts in fall and winter; a broader,

pale supercilium; and a more contrasting gray nape. A dark lower border to a tan cheek immediately separates Clay-colored from Chipping, which has a grayish brown cheek that lacks a dark lower border.

In fall and winter, Brewer’s is more similar to Clay-colored than to Chipping, but differs with a streaked nape versus gray nape in Clay-colored, grayish versus whitish submustachial region, and plainer, more subdued facial pattern with an indistinct median crown stripe versus a bold one in Clay-colored. Brewer’s also has grayish buff underparts compared with Clay-colored’s warm ones.

Le Conte’s Sparrow and Nelson’s Sparrow

These two small sparrows (5 in. long) in the genus *Ammodramus* are both secretive away from breeding areas, and often allow only short glimpses before they disappear into dense grass. Saltmarsh Sparrow can be similar to Nelson’s Sparrow in appearance and structure, and the differences noted here for Nelson’s can be applied to Saltmarsh as well.

UNCHANGING CHARACTERISTICS: While superficially similar to Le Conte’s Sparrow, Nelson’s Sparrow differs with its uniformly rounded head versus Le Conte’s flat forecrown and rear peaked crown. Nelson’s also has a more elongated body with a rounded chest versus Le Conte’s more compact, rounded body. Nelson’s has a longer bill compared with Le Conte’s somewhat conical, pointed bill. (See Quiz 2.)

SUPPLEMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NON-BBI DETAILS: Nelson’s Sparrow has a broad, gray crown stripe bordered by thin black lines versus Le Conte’s Sparrow’s brownish black streaked crown with a thin, whitish median stripe. Nelson’s also has a

QUIZ 3

SONG, LINCOLN'S, AND SAVANNAH SPARROWS

These three sparrows have somewhat similar plumage patterns and sizes. ID information is provided in the text. Can you identify these birds? Answers are below.



broad, gray nape, while Le Conte's has a streaked nape with purplish lines. Nelson's has distinct white lines on its back versus straw-colored "cornrows" on Le Conte's back. (See Quiz 2.)

Song, Lincoln's, and Savannah Sparrows

UNCHANGING CHARACTERISTICS: Song Sparrow is the largest of these three species (6¼ in. long vs. 5¾ in. long for Lincoln's Sparrow and 5½ in. long for Savannah Sparrow) and has a noticeably rounder head; heavier, more conical bill with curved culmen; and longer, rounded tail, which it often cocks upward in short escape flights. (See "Behavior," p. 28.)

With its shorter tail and tinier bill, Lincoln's gives a more delicate first impression than Song. Relaxed Lincoln's typically show a more peaked rear crown than the other two species, but the bird in Quiz 3 is alert and shows a rounded crown like that of Song.

Savannah differs by having a thinner body structure, smaller head and bill, and noticeably shorter, notched tail than both Song and Lincoln's. The shorter tail is noticeable in flight, and combined with a distinctive direct, twisting flight style helps quickly identify Savannah.

SUPPLEMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NON-BBI

DETAILS: All three species have brownish gray upperparts with rust color interspersed, and whitish to buff underparts that contain variable dark streaks

and a central breast spot. Some helpful plumage differences include Lincoln's buff central crown stripe and upper breast versus whitish on Song and Savannah, and a yellowish supercilium in Savannah versus gray on Lincoln's and whitish on Song. Lincoln's has a noticeably grayer face than the other two species, especially the supercilium.

Savannah and Lincoln's both have finer streaks on the upper breast versus denser, blurrier streaks on the upper breast and belly of Song. Lincoln's also has a streaked rather than whitish throat, and a buff eye-ring versus white on Song and Savannah. All three can show a dark central breast spot, but Song's is usually larger and bolder. The plumage details for Savannah Sparrow do not include the "Ipswich" and "Belding's" subspecies. 🐦

Kevin T. Karlson is an accomplished birder, tour leader, and wildlife photographer. He is a coauthor of The Shorebird Guide (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006) and two other books. Dale Rosselet is vice president for education for New Jersey Audubon Society and oversees its statewide education program.

QUIZ ANSWERS

QUIZ 1: From left to right (all in nonbreeding plumage), Brewer's Sparrow, first-winter Chipping Sparrow, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

QUIZ 2: Le Conte's Sparrow (left) and Gulf Coast form of Nelson's Sparrow (right). Different postures in these birds result in different physical appearances, but both species have a similar body shape and structural features when their poses are the same.

QUIZ 3: From left to right, Savannah Sparrow, Song Sparrow, and Lincoln's Sparrow.

Photos and excerpt from the forthcoming book PETERSON REFERENCE GUIDE TO BIRDING BY IMPRESSION, to be published in April 2015, by Kevin T. Karlson and Dale Rosselet, photographs by Kevin T. Karlson and Brian Small. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.

BIRDWATCHING



YOU GOTTA LOVE 'EM: New birders look and learn at Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

WHAT BEGINNERS TEACH US

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHERS KNOW A THING OR TWO ABOUT BIRDS,
BIRDING, BEAUTY, AND ENTHUSIASM

BY MAEVE KIM

*The message on my answering
machine was breathless and excited:*

"It's Herman! Herman from class! I was just picking up something for my wife at the outlet mall, and there was this really weird bird next to the parking lot. So when I got home, I looked in an old bird book, and I thought I figured it out. Then I looked online, and I was right: It was a Siberian Accentor!"

Hmmm. A Siberian Accentor in northern Vermont.

At an outlet mall.

I had to go online myself to find out how likely that was. I learned that the bird breeds in Siberia, as the name suggests, and migrates to southeastern Asia in the winter. Two were recorded in Alaska in September 2014, on St. Lawrence Island and St. Paul Island, and another showed up in Seward in early 2013, and sometimes — rarely — it shows up as a vagrant in western Europe.

I called Herman back and asked him to describe the bird.

Was it bigger or smaller than a robin?
"About the same size. Maybe. Maybe smaller. I think. I'm not sure."

Did you notice any colors? "Yes! It had dark somewhere. Maybe on the back."

Anything else? "There was something fancy going on with its face."

Something fancy. Like an eye stripe? Or a marking that looked like spectacles? "It just looked fancy. You know, complicated."

OK. Could you see the bird's breast? "Yes! I should have mentioned that first. That's how I knew I was right! When I saw the picture of the Siberian Accentor! The breast was sort of rusty, sort of mixed with yellow. Or maybe orange. With spots or speckles or dots sort of. Just like the picture!"

You didn't happen to get a photo, did you, Herman, maybe with your phone? "I did! Do you want to see it?"

I assured Herman that I would love to see the photo. About half an hour later, he e-mailed me a crisp, clear picture of an immature American Robin.

Ten suggestions for successful nature walks

We should all be helpful to new birders. Follow these 10 steps the next time you have the opportunity to share the wonders of birds with beginners.

1 Bring extra binoculars. I've seen beginners struggle with compact binoculars, binoculars that were over 40 years old, and binoculars with cracked lenses. One woman even brought a tiny, elegant pair of mother-of-pearl opera glasses!

2 Teach binocular basics. At the start of any walk, make sure everyone knows how to get the most out of their optics. Check that eyecups are down for the people with eyeglasses and up for everyone else. Demonstrate how to calibrate binoculars. (This is especially important since beginners often borrow other people's optics.) Pass around a cleaning cloth. And explain how to find birds with your eyes first, then raise your binocs.

3 Explain the clock method. Then use it to tell people where to look. Example: There's a bright orange bird at three o'clock in that willow.

4 Be selective. Your goal as leader is to make sure everyone sees some birds and hears some birdsong — not that they know about every bird that you see or hear. Stop and point out birds that are close enough for beginners to get their binoculars on.

5 Take your time. Birds that are everyday or common to you may be brand-new to beginners. Give everyone time to watch a Song Sparrow throw its head back and sing.

6 Enjoy songs that repeat. New birders often have difficulty separating songs and calls from background noise, so let the faint, distant, buzzy warbler go. Direct attention to the catbird that's singing repeatedly and close by. Stop the walk, describe the song, ask people to listen, talk about mnemonic tricks, and show pictures of the bird.

7 Savor common birds. When a newbie is excited about having found a Mourning Dove or European Starling, don't treat the discovery as a "junk bird."

8 Explain yourself. It's good to use precise words (*bill* instead of *mouth*, for example), but don't pepper your conversation with words like *lores*, *supercilium*, and *culmen*. And when you do use terms such as *leading edge*, take the time to explain.

9 Avoid birder's jargon. A beginner will have an awful time searching for *sharpie*, *spotty*, *mo-do*, and *teevee* in the index of his or her field guide.

10 Bring a scope. Almost nothing is as satisfying as watching a new birder's jaw drop as he or she gets that first good look at an Eastern Meadowlark singing on a fencepost, a Common Goldeneye drake tossing its head back, or the yellow stare of a Snowy Owl.



YOU GOTTA LOVE beginning birders. We were all, every one of us, new to birding once, and we have all made countless misidentifications.

My early birding notebooks are chock-full of truly miraculous sightings. After I'd been birding for about 10 years, I was lucky enough to meet a wonderful older birder, a woman who was confined to her home because of illness. Along with sharing her feeder birds with me, she went over my old notebooks and helped me figure out what I had really seen. She nourished my growing passion for birding (while gently steering me away from accentors and toward robins), and left me with a debt of gratitude that I still feel today.

As a way to pay back that debt (and because it's so much fun), I have taught classes to more than 200 new birders from age 7 to age 87 and have been leading walks for beginners for 20 years.

When I started teaching, I figured there might be a handful of interested people — but they keep coming, and their enthusiasm, curiosity, and excitement are consistently wonderful. They



Steve Young/VIREO

“Wait a minute! You mean female Indigo Buntings don’t have to have a single bit of indigo color on them?!? Can they get away with that?!?”



BAFFLING: The female Indigo Bunting is warm brown, not bright blue like the male, and can easily be confused with sparrows.

Jim Zipp

come to every class bubbling over with questions. They bring their cell phones, iPads, and even fat photo albums to show me pictures of favorite birds and mystery birds. They send e-mail and call me and turn out for walks in rain, sleet, wind, and snow.

To each one, I try to be as helpful as I can, and you should, too. (See sidebar.) In return, they’ve taught me a lot about birds, birding, and the importance of natural beauty in human lives. What follows are only a few of the many lessons I’ve learned from them.

New birders enthusiastically embrace the implausible.

A few months after the Siberian Accentor call, I got an e-mail with a

one-line message that would pique the interest of any Vermont birder: Black-headed Grosbeaks!

A Black-headed Grosbeak was marginally more plausible than a Siberian Accentor. Plural Black-headed Grosbeaks seemed unlikely, but maybe this was a typo.

I e-mailed back immediately. The woman told me that a big flock of robins had been in her yard for two days, feeding on sumac berries. “And now they’ve been joined by 20 or 30 Black-headed Grosbeaks — I’m so excited!”

Twenty or thirty. My hopes for a vagrant plummeted. I asked for a description. The birds were “light-colored in the front, orange-ish on top, blackish on the sides, with black beaks.”

I asked if they had big seed-eater bills or not. She said she’d look. A few hours later, she e-mailed me back with the correct identification: Cedar Waxwings.

New birders remind us of the beauty of everyday birds.

On one field trip, I stopped the group so everyone could look at two goldfinches bathing in a puddle right in the middle of the trail.

In my mind, the teachable moment was about birds bathing. I planned to say something about mites and parasites and maybe put in a plug for adding baths or drips to backyard feeding areas. But before I could reach full pedagogical mode, a woman gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.



JUST LIKE THE PICTURE: Both an immature American Robin and Siberian Accentor (right) have breasts that could perhaps be described as sort of rusty, sort of mixed with yellow, and each may be said to have something fancy going on with its face. The accentor was in a park in Gwangju, South Korea.

CEDAR WAXWINGS:
That they are not
Black-headed
Grosbeaks makes
them no less exciting
when it's your yard
they choose to visit.



"Oh," she breathed. "They're incredible." She turned to her friend and said, very solemnly, "Write that down: goldfinch. They must be very rare."

New birders remind us to look at other critters, too.

Natural Vermont was the summer reading theme at our tiny local library. One of the activities was a walk to a nearby beaver pond, for children ages four to six and their parents. The kids were eager and excited. Everyone got good looks at a bluebird posing on a snag in the bright sun, a robin pulling a long worm out of the ground, a flicker diving into a nesting cavity, and a Canada Goose family with five fluffy young. At the end of the walk, the librarian asked the group, "What did you see?"

Almost as one, the little birders chorused, "We saw a SLUG!"

New birders challenge us.

The new birders in my classes confidently expect answers from me. Always. Even when their questions contain no useful information at all.

Basically brown. Not very big. What do you think it was?

It's really pudgy, you know. Not obese, just pudgy. What kind of bird is really pudgy?

Gorgeous colors. Ecrú. And salmon. No. Maybe peach. No! Apricot, with a blush of rose! And also something between burnt-umber and turkey red. (This new birder was a painter.)

There's a hawk in the yard! Right now! It's just glaring! What kind of hawk just glares?

And, my favorite — The bird's face reminded me a bit of George Clooney. Does that help?

New birders remind us that our hobby might be baffling to outsiders.

In class one evening, a woman blurted out indignantly, "Wait a minute! You mean female Indigo Buntings don't have to have a single bit of indigo color on them?!? Can they get away with that?!?"

“Birders always point up into the trees and say things like Blackbrainian and Chestnut-nosed, but there isn’t anything there!”

As one group assembled at a trailhead, a distinguished-looking man announced, “I have to warn you. I don’t believe warblers exist.” He went on to describe his firm belief that warblers were invented by birdwatchers as an inside joke. “Birders always point up into the trees and say things like Blackbrainian and Chestnut-nosed, but there isn’t anything there!” (Later, on the walk, the gentleman got a good look at two Yellow-rumped Warblers and reluctantly admitted that maybe some warblers do exist.)

Most beginning birders want to use the language of their new hobby, but they don’t always hit the target.

Some of my favorite neologisms are Northern Petula, Longland Lapsur, Shork-shanked Hawk, and Pectuarial Sandpiper.

And, finally, new birders sometimes become involved in birdwatching in very unexpected ways.

The voice on the phone was young, female, and timid: “I was just, um, in the general store, um, and two women were talking about your class, and, um, they really like it, and, um, um” — deep breath — “imhoping-youhaveroomforme.”

“Sorry. I didn’t quite catch that last part.”

“I’m hoping you have room for me.”

“Well,” I said, “the current class ends next week, but I think there’s room in the one that starts on the 28th.”

“Oh!” Gasp. “I’m so relieved. I’m pregnant. Well, of course that’s obvious.”

Hmmm. I had no idea who owned the breathy voice, I couldn’t see her over the phone, and I’m really not good at detecting pregnancy by voice alone.

My caller rushed on: “Four months. Well, a little past four months. It’s my first. I’m healthy, really healthy. I’m having a textbook healthy normal pregnancy, my doctor says!”

My brain made a leap to a possible connection between my beginning birding classes and this young woman’s pregnancy: “That’s excellent. The field trips should be no trouble at all for you.”

Long pause. Then, in a tiny voice, “Field trips?”

“Oh, yes,” I assured her, “but we never go more than four miles. It’s usually on flat terrain, but sometimes there are gentle hills. And we won’t go out if it’s pouring rain.”

Again, “Field trips?”

A sharp intake of air — and then, “Oh! Oh! Oh!” She sounded like a student eager to please her teacher by getting the question right before anyone else in the class. “I get it, I get it! This is so Vermonty! Wait till I tell my friends back in Newark!”

I was beginning to feel that I might be missing an important

thread in our conversation.

My caller babbled on, her voice high and excited: “It’s your method, right? How cool is that? You do field trips to help us feel like we’re part of nature! Right? Like being pregnant is natural and stuff?”

“Well,” I said cautiously, “different participants take away different lessons from field trips, of course. And I can see how lessons related to pregnancy might be foremost in your mind right now. But the main purpose of the field trips is to see birds.”

“Birds?”

I now had no doubt that we were having a serious communication problem.

“Well, yes. It’s important for beginners to get out in the field in addition to seeing pictures in the classroom. All my birding classes include...”

The young voice interrupted me: “Did you say birding class? Like, birds?”

“Well, yes. That’s what I tea...”

Another gasp.

“Oh! I thought you were teaching birthing classes!”

This young mother later had her baby, a little girl named Wren. Only five weeks after Wren was born, her mother signed up for a series of four classes for new birders. She has gone on two field trips now and has started collecting children’s books about nature for her daughter. I have no doubt at all that Wren will grow up to be her generation’s Peterson or Sibley! 🐦

Maeve Kim wrote the article “Born-Again Bird-Watcher” in our August 2012 issue. She is an educational-testing consultant, a musician, a retired teacher, and a lifelong birder who leads bird walks and teaches birding classes. She recently published her first novel, There’s Nothing 86 Tonight.

TABLET EXTRAS

Tap the links below to learn more about birds and topics addressed in this article.

GETTING STARTED

The basics of attracting, identifying, helping, and enjoying birds.

ISLAND ACCENTOR

See Siberian Accentors spotted on St. Lawrence and St. Paul Islands, Alaska, in September 2014.

ALASKAN ACCENTOR

See the Siberian Accentor recorded in Seward, Alaska, in January 2013.

VERMONT CHECKLIST

Browse the state checklist approved by the Vermont Bird Records Committee (PDF).

INDIGO BUNTINGS

View photos of males and females.

BORN-AGAIN BIRD-WATCHER

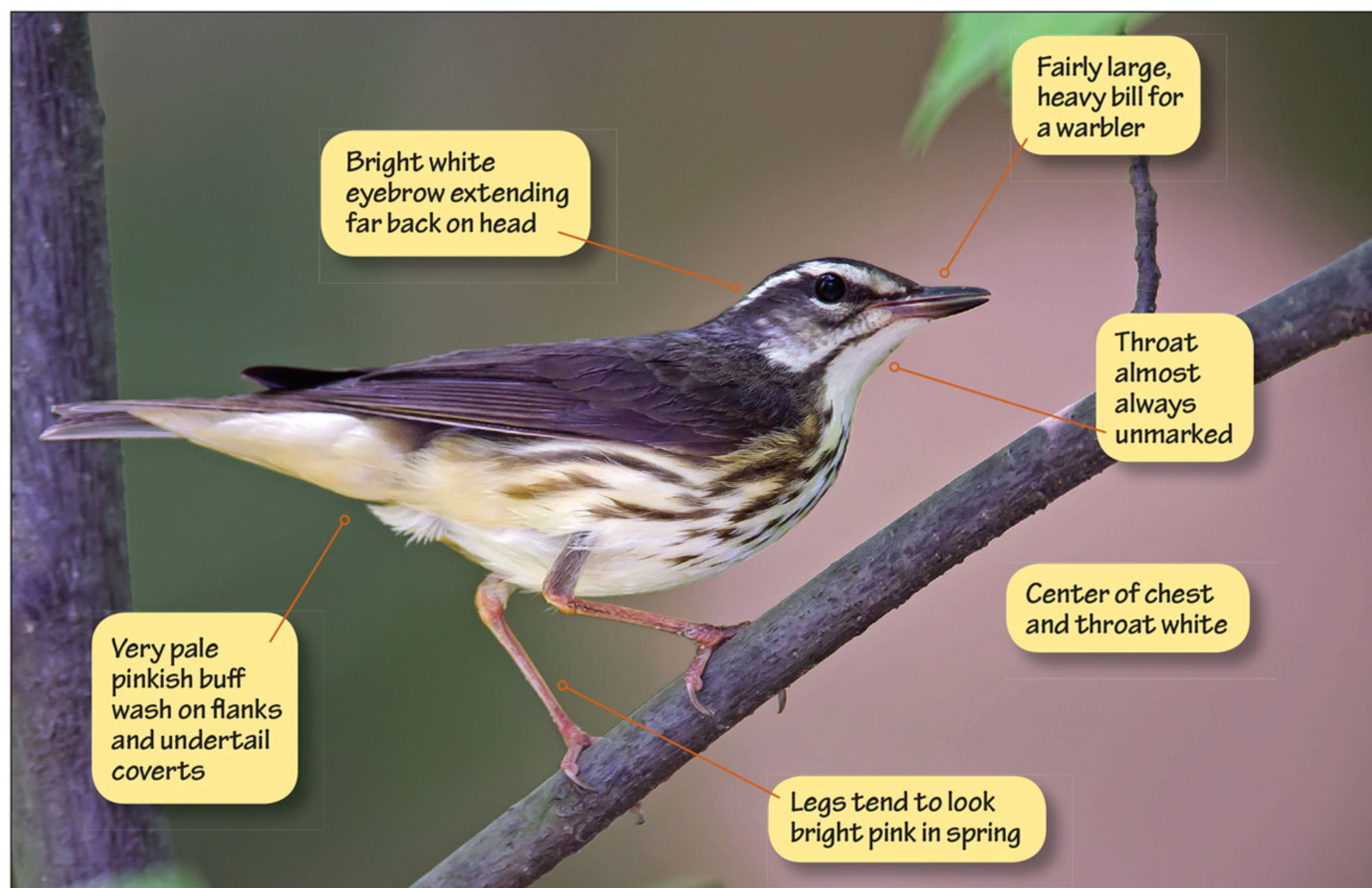
Maeve Kim’s article about the difference between watching birds and getting birds.

BIRDERS NEAR YOU

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Louisiana Waterthrush



Louisiana Waterthrush, adult **May** in Summit County, Ohio

What to look for

Bill shape. Large for a warbler, thicker and averaging longer than that of Northern Waterthrush.

Eyebrow. May be dull in front of eye, but white and often broadening behind the eye.

Throat pattern. Usually white and unmarked, but can have small spots.

Overall pattern. Tends to show strong pattern on face, dull stripes on chest, brightest color toward rear of body under wings and tail.

Flank color. Underparts are mostly white, but flanks and undertail coverts show contrasting ground color of odd cinnamon or pinkish buff.

For just about any generalization about North American warblers, it's likely that Louisiana Waterthrush is an exception. It's brown and white and walks on the ground, while most warblers are colorful and flit in trees. It has a loud, arresting voice, while most warblers have softer songs and calls. It's even exceptional in the timing of its migration: By the time the northward flood of warblers reaches its peak (late April in the south, May in the north), it has been back on nesting territories for more than a month. It is one of the earliest migrants among warblers, on the move in March or even February.

We might regard Louisiana Waterthrush as unique — if not for its close relative, Northern Waterthrush. The two species are often challenging to tell apart. Northern is much more widespread,

nesting all across Canada and Alaska and into the northern states. Louisiana's breeding range is limited to the eastern half of the lower 48 states, barely getting north to the Great Lakes and west to central Texas. But Louisiana is known to stray to the Southwest and to California, sometimes farther afield.

As a young birder, I ran across the simplistic mnemonic of "white Louisiana, yellow Northern" as a way to separate the two waterthrushes. It's true that Louisianas are mostly white on the underparts, while Northerns are variably suffused with yellow there. But the palest Northerns are essentially white below, while Louisianas are partly buff on the lower underparts, so we can't use the mark without knowing how it works.

In fact, contrast of color below is one of the keys for Louisiana. Its eyebrow (supercilium), throat, and chest are white, but that contrasts with a pale but distinct pinkish buff on the flanks and undertail coverts. The color is apparent in a good view if we're looking for it. By comparison, Northerns vary from whitish to fairly rich yellow below, but they don't show contrasting buff on the flanks. The area may have some smudgy brown but not a background of a clearly different color.

The shape of the supercilium is often a good clue: narrowing toward the back on Northern, often broadening on Louisiana, so that the white eyebrow and throat make an eye-catching combination. The throat is usually unmarked on Louisiana, usually spotted on Northern (but see the exceptions in the photo captions). The bill averages larger on Louisiana. As you gain experience, you may notice that the tail-bobbing of both waterthrushes looks more exaggerated on Louisiana than on Northern.

However, these birds provide a classic example of the need to check every field mark. Just one will seldom be diagnostic. Studying waterthrushes on migration can build your powers of observation and make you a more skillful birder.

Kenn Kaufman is co-author of *Kaufman Field Guide to Nature of New England* and author of *Kaufman Field Guide to Advanced Birding* and other books. Brian E. Small (www.BrianSmallPhoto.com) is a professional nature photographer who lives in Los Angeles.



Louisiana Waterthrush, adult May in Summit County, Ohio

In light reflected off surrounding foliage, the white underparts of Louisiana Waterthrush can look tinged with yellow. Notice here that there's still a distinct contrast between the whitish chest and the pinkish buff on the flanks. The streaks on the underparts look paler and sparser on Louisianas, darker and more extensive on Northerns. The Northerns with the darkest streaks, however, tend

to be those with the darkest yellow ground color below, usually a more visible point. The brighter pink legs of Louisiana (mainly in spring) are often mentioned as a field mark, but this point is useful only occasionally, because individuals vary so much. Bill shape and supercilium pattern may be better pieces of the puzzle to grasp.



Northern Waterthrush, adult May on the Seward Peninsula, Alaska

Its location in western Alaska is almost enough by itself for a positive ID, but this Northern Waterthrush also displays a whole suite of field marks. The underparts and supercilium are lightly washed with yellow. Many individuals are richer yellow than this, and some are whiter, but the key is that the color is evenly distributed, without any richer wash of color on the flanks. The throat is lightly

spotted, and the supercilium trails off narrowly toward the back. The streaking on the underparts looks quite dark and extensive. Finally, the bill averages shorter and thinner on this species than on Louisiana Waterthrush, and that difference is visible in these photos, although individual variation sometimes makes this hard to judge.



Louisiana Waterthrush, adult May in Summit County, Ohio

Sources mention throat pattern as a major field mark for separating the waterthrush species — plain on Louisiana, spotted on Northern — but it isn't necessarily a reliable one. The Louisiana Waterthrush in this photo shows a random dark mark that seems to result from a disarranged feather, but some individuals show a few actual dark spots on

the throat. Conversely, some Northern Waterthrushes have throat markings so light that they are almost invisible in the field. So, although this is often a helpful mark, it isn't diagnostic. The waterthrushes are the classic example of a challenge that requires us to check every possible field mark in order to build a solid case for the ID.



Northern Waterthrush, adult May in Galveston County, Texas

Waterthrushes are often seen in dim light as they walk in deep shade along streams and swamps. They can be hard to distinguish when viewed quickly, even for experienced birders, so they give us practice at a valuable birding skill: saying, "I don't know." This individual, however, is not so tough. Although its supercilium is expanded a little toward

the rear, it is also suffused with yellow, and so are the underparts. The faint yellow wash is as strong on the chest as anywhere else; it does not brighten into buff on the flanks. The throat has fine dark spots, the streaks on the underparts are dark and extensive, and the bill is relatively small, all confirming the ID as Northern Waterthrush.

Streamside vocalists

The two species of waterthrush have distinctly different songs, but both are strikingly loud compared with most warblers. There's a reason why it would be an advantage for the birds to turn up the volume: Their habitat is often dominated by rushing water. The sound would drown out lesser vocalists. Similarly loud voices are characteristic of other birds that live in this kind of habitat. One is American Dipper, which blasts out its loud song and metallic calls over the din of streams flowing in our western mountains.

Streamside monitors

Louisiana Waterthrushes living along streams do more than just make birders happy; they also serve as indicators of environmental quality. Studies in locations as diverse as Pennsylvania, Georgia, and southeastern Minnesota have found a clear connection between the presence of the species and the health of ecosystems. In places where pollution or acid runoff from mines had affected the streams, the birds were absent or present in reduced numbers with reduced breeding success. Since the species sings so loudly, it can be surveyed quickly and easily, with much less effort than taking numerous water samples from streams and rivers. In fact, the National Park Service is now using data on the distribution of Louisiana Waterthrush as one way of monitoring eastern watersheds. 🐦



Stillwater National
Wildlife Refuge

Molly Mehling

HOTSPOTS 205-208



no. 205 key west tropical forest and botanical garden key west, florida

no. 206 august a. busch memorial conservation area st. charles, missouri

no. 207 kettleson hogsback wma spirit lake, iowa

no. 208 stillwater national wildlife refuge fallon, nevada

IN SPRING 2014, birders at Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Nevada, shown above, reported single-day high counts of 7,200 Long-billed Dowitchers, 1,300 American Avocets, and 850 Dunlin. The refuge is part of the Lahontan Valley Wetlands, one of the most important wetlands areas in the American West. In some years, as many as 250,000 shorebirds, including 150,000 Long-billed Dowitchers, stop over during spring and fall migration.

Nearly a quarter of a million coots have been recorded in the fall, and in winter, Bald Eagles and Rough-legged and Ferruginous Hawks roam the refuge. Snow Goose, Redhead, and many other species of wintering waterfowl number in the thousands. Read more about the birds of Stillwater and three other hotspots on the pages that follow. — *Matt Mendenhall*

key west tropical forest and botanical garden key west, florida

24°34'25.02"N 81°44'55.09"W



Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden is a lush 15-acre garden just north of Key West, at the southernmost tip of the Florida Keys. From north- or southbound Hwy. 1, drive to mile marker 4.5 on Stock Island and turn north onto College Rd. Drive 0.1 miles to the entrance on the right.

Southern Florida is filled with great places to bird, and this garden is no exception. It lies behind a chain-link fence on a dirt road in Key West and attracts birds, butterflies, and mammals. My husband and I stumbled upon it just as we were leaving the city's traffic and crowds.

We had the place almost to ourselves. Although it's advertised primarily as a botanical garden, we found a variety of birds in the fig trees, limes, and coco plums lining the paths. Our day's list included Bald Eagle, Osprey, Turkey Vulture, a distant kite, Palm Warbler, Muscovy Duck, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Egret, and two Common Gallinules swimming in and out of the weeds. An Anhinga spread its wings to soak in the sun, and Yellow-rumped and Yellow-throated Warblers flitted through the leaves high overhead. We also encountered lots of beautiful blue-patterned butterflies.

Resident species include White-crowned Pigeon. Black-whiskered Vireo is present spring through fall. During migrations, fallouts of tanagers and other songbirds occur. The garden is one of the stops on the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, and the trail guide describes it as "one of the richest birding experiences in the lower Keys." I heartily agree. — *Shirley L. Ruhe*

Shirley L. Ruhe is a former reporter and an avid birder. She wrote about Shark Valley in the Everglades, Hotspot Near You No. 199, in December 2014.

sites nearby

Tablet readers: Tap the links to read more about each site.

National Key Deer Refuge

National wildlife refuge about 15 miles from Key West. Antillean Nighthawk, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, White-crowned Pigeon.

Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, Hotspot Near You No. 9

At the western tip of Key West at the end of Southard St. Spring and fall migrants, Caribbean Short-eared Owl.

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT

Tropical forest with two of the last freshwater ponds left in the Florida Keys. Giant mahogany trees, Cuban palms, orchids, two butterfly gardens, and native plants.

TERRAIN

Flat paths. 70 percent of grounds wheelchair-accessible.

BIRDS

190 species. Muscovy, Masked, and Ruddy Ducks, American White and Brown Pelicans, Common Gallinule, American Coot, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Magnificent Frigatebird, Common and Antillean Nighthawks, Belted Kingfisher, Black-bellied and Wilson's Plovers, White-crowned Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-Dove, White-winged and Mourning Doves, Common Ground-Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Tree, Bank, Cave, Barn, and Cliff Swallows, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Shiny Cowbird, 36 warblers, nine vireos. Rare: Bahama Mockingbird.

WHEN TO GO

Best during migration: March through April and September through December.

AMENITIES

Raised boardwalk. Eight self-guided tours. Small visitor center offers short introductory video and has bird list, bottled water, and restrooms.

ACCESS

Publicly owned botanical garden. Fees: adults \$7, seniors \$5, children under 12 free. Parking free. Open 10-4 daily; to enter earlier, call 24 hours in advance. Closed July 4, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.

TIPS

Paths generally shaded, but sunny spots can be hot. Wear a hat and bring water.

FOR MORE INFO

Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden, (305) 296-1504, www.keywestbotanicalgarden.org. Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, floridabirdingtrail.com.

www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/hotspotsmap

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT

Forests, grasslands, croplands, fields, prairies, wetlands, and 28 lakes and ponds.

TERRAIN

Six trails less than a mile long as well as the 3.2-mile Busch Hiking and Biking Trail. Several trails are easy and offer at least partial wheelchair access. Auto route tours excellent bird-viewing areas.

BIRDS

260 species. Blue- and Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Mallard, Ring-necked and Wood Ducks, Bufflehead, mergansers, Northern Bobwhite, egrets, herons, Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, Red-shouldered, and Red-tailed Hawks, Sora, Great Horned and Barred Owls, Wilson's Snipe, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-bellied, Red-headed, and Pileated Woodpeckers, Red- and White-breasted Nuthatches, Tufted Titmouse, Cedar Waxwing, kinglets, Wood Thrush, 35 warblers, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Indigo Bunting, Eurasian Tree Sparrow (uncommon). Rarities: Harris's Sparrow, Red Crossbill.

WHEN TO GO

Year-round.

AMENITIES

Visitor center offers restrooms, a small gift shop, exhibits, and nature programs for all ages, including bird-ID sessions. More primitive restrooms throughout the property.

ACCESS

State conservation area. Admission free. Open from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. Visitor center open 8-5 Monday through Friday, except state holidays and Thanksgiving weekend.

TIPS

Bring insect spray and water. Hunting is allowed; check website for current regulations and seasons.

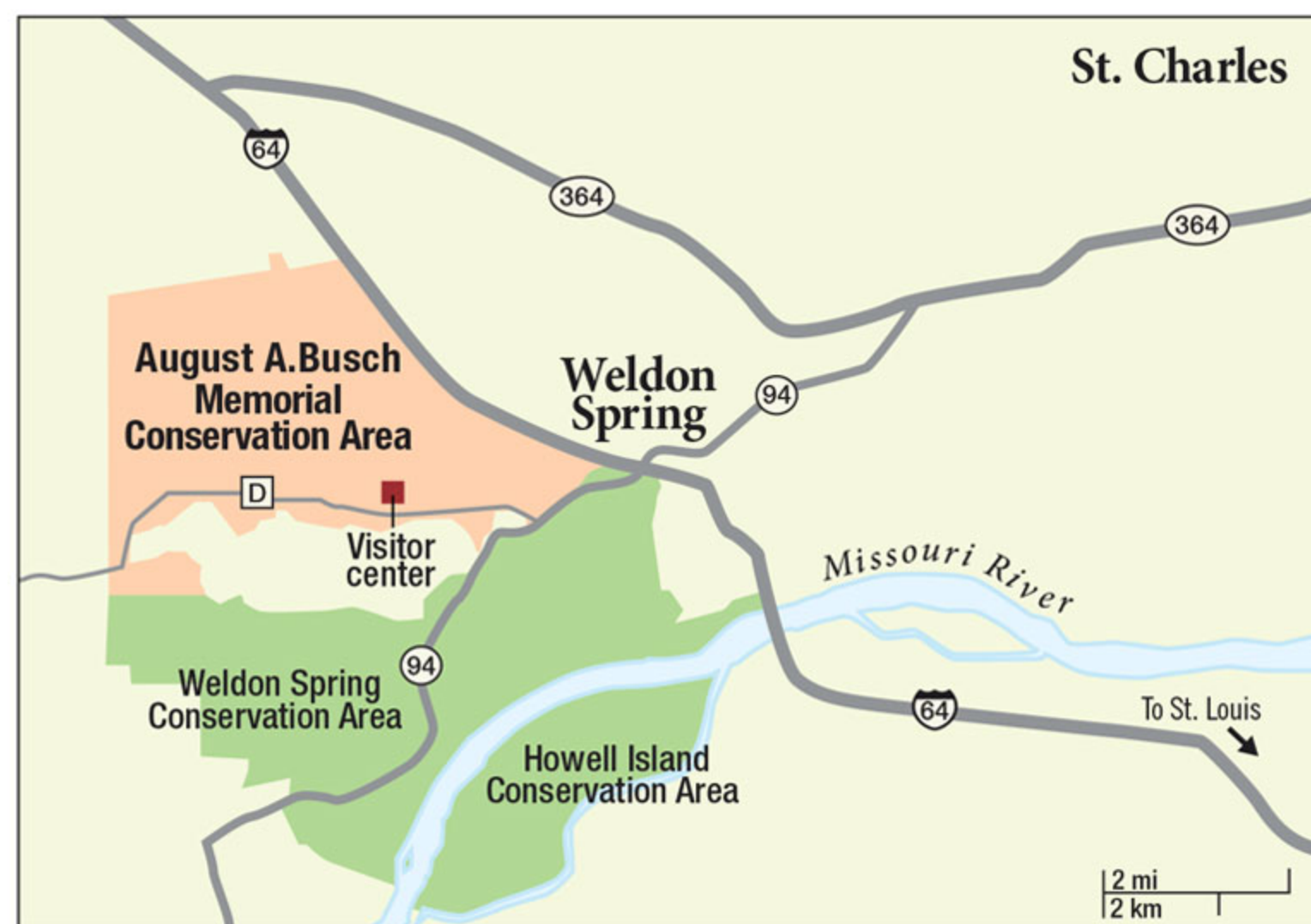
FOR MORE INFO

August A. Busch Memorial Conservation Area, (636) 441-4554, <http://mdc.mo.gov/node/300>. St. Louis Audubon, www.stlouisaudubon.org. Audubon Society of Missouri, mobirds.org.

www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/hotspotsmap

august a. busch memorial conservation area st. charles, missouri

38°42'19.06"N 90°44'25.19"W



The August A. Busch Memorial Conservation Area includes 6,987 acres of forests, grasslands, and lakes about 40 minutes from downtown St. Louis. From the city, take I-64 west to Hwy. 94 and turn left. Drive 1.3 miles to Rte. D., turn right, and continue 1.9 miles to the entrance on the right.

Though primarily known as a hunting and fishing spot, the August A. Busch Memorial Conservation Area offers plenty of year-round birding opportunities for those who aren't interested in taking a few home at the end of the day.

My favorite season is fall, when Cooper's Hawks float kite-like in clear skies, Ring-billed Gulls compete with human anglers, and ducks gather in ponds and wetlands. Many of the best habitats are accessible by well-maintained gravel roads or short hiking trails made easily navigable by signs installed by local Boy Scout troops. A few feeders are within viewing distance of picnic areas, so you can watch hungry birds while you eat.

In early spring, watch and listen for displaying woodcocks. Later in spring and in summer, the many attractions include warblers, vireos, tanagers, orioles, cuckoos, and buntings. Several warblers remain all summer, including Prothonotary, Yellow, Northern Parula, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Visit in the evening to have a chance to hear Eastern Whip-poor-will, Chuck-will's-widow, and Common Nighthawk. The visitor center offers educational programs, including night hikes that sometimes feature calling Barred or Great Horned Owls. — Charlene Oldham

Charlene Oldham is a teacher and journalist. She described Pere Marquette State Park in Grafton, Illinois, Hotspot Near You No. 189, in August 2014.

sites nearby

Tablet readers: Tap the links to read more about each site.

Weldon Springs Conservation Area

South of Busch Conservation Area off Hwy. 94. More than 8,300 acres. 207 species, excellent in spring.

Howell Island Conservation Area

A 2,500-acre island in the Missouri River, accessible via a causeway off Eatherton Rd. Forests, grassy fields, and other habitats attract owls, hawks, herons, and songbirds.

kettleson hogsback wma

spirit lake, iowa

43°28'18.87"N 95° 8'35.06"W



Kettleson Hogsback, a 2,100-acre wildlife management area in northwestern Iowa, adjoins Big Spirit Lake and the Minnesota border. From Spirit Lake, head north on Peoria Ave. 1.5 miles to 240th Ave. and turn left. Drive 1.7 miles to 125th St., turn left, and continue 0.6 miles to the headquarters entrance on the right.

Many people think of Iowa as one large cornfield, but the state boasts many beautiful landscapes. Situated on rolling glacial moraine punctuated by prairie-pothole marshes, larger lakes, oak woodlands, and remnant native prairie, Kettleson Hogsback Wildlife Management Area is a great example.

I became entranced by its incredible variety of birds immediately upon being hired as area manager in the early 1970s. It didn't take long to realize this gem hosted nesting Canvasbacks, Black Terns, Red-necked Grebes, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, plus summering pelican colonies, and one of the nation's northwestern-most Prothonotary Warbler breeding sites.

While paddling a kayak to the north end of a lake recently, I encountered at least 35 singing Marsh Wrens along a border of cattails and open water; countless more wrens proclaimed territories from cattails extending far back to the shoreline. Visitors can spot almost every Midwestern migrant, three species of loon, 12 flycatchers, 21 sparrows and allies, and a dozen members of the blackbird family. With birdlife so diverse, Kettleson Hogsback might just be the Hawkeye State's best birding destination. — Doug Harr

Doug Harr is president of Iowa Audubon and the retired coordinator of the Iowa DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program.

sites nearby

Tablet readers: Tap the links to read more about each site.

Cayler Prairie-Dugout Creek WMA Complex

3,400 acres of native prairies and wetlands eight miles west of Spirit Lake. Upland Sandpiper, Sedge Wren, Henslow's Sparrow, Dickcissel.

Spring Run WMA

4,700-acre pothole wetland area two miles southeast of Spirit Lake. Gray Partridge, Yellow-headed Blackbird.

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT

Glacial lakes, prairie pothole wetlands, native and restored prairies, oak forest, agricultural fields, and hedgerows.

TERRAIN

Rolling hills, gravel roads. Hiking trail on a ridge from headquarters to Big Spirit Lake.

BIRDS

273 species. Nesting: Trumpeter Swan, Ruddy Duck, Red-necked Grebe, American Bittern, Upland Sandpiper, Black Tern, Black-billed Cuckoo, Belted Kingfisher, Willow Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike, Warbling Vireo, Marsh Wren, Cedar Waxwing, Louisiana Waterthrush, Prothonotary Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, Scarlet Tanager, Dickcissel, Western Meadowlark, Great-tailed Grackle, Orchard Oriole. Migrants: Red-breasted Merganser, Common Loon, American White Pelican (also summering subadults), American Golden-Plover, Franklin's Gull, American Pipit, Snow Bunting, Nelson's Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird.

WHEN TO GO

Late March to mid-November.

AMENITIES

Restrooms and fee campground located at Marble Beach Recreation Area. Information kiosk near headquarters.

ACCESS

State wildlife management area, federal waterfowl production area, and state recreation area complex. County roads and numerous parking lots surround complex. Open year-round. Free.

TIPS

Hogsback Ridge Trail is the best bet for viewing waterfowl on adjacent lakes (take a spotting scope) and for a wide variety of forest birds in trailside woodlands. Majority of area open to hunting in fall.

FOR MORE INFO

Kettleson Hogsback Wildlife Management Area, (712) 362-1485, www.watchablewildlifenwia.org/sites-KettlesonsHB.htm. Iowa Audubon, iowaaudubon.org.

www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/hotspotsmap

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT

Wetlands, open water, irrigated pastures, semi-desert grasslands.

TERRAIN

Flat, open. Good birding from car.

BIRDS

250 species. Year-round: American White Pelican, White-faced Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Common Yellowthroat, Black Tern, Least Bittern. Spring and fall: Long-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin, Wilson's Phalarope, Snowy Plover, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Eared and Western Grebes, Tundra Swan, Snow Goose. Summer: Wilson's Phalarope, Sora, Virginia Rail, Franklin's Gull, Forster's and Black Terns, American Bittern. Winter: Bald Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Short-eared Owl.

WHEN TO GO

Year-round. Shorebirds from late April to mid-May and July through September. Waterfowl arrive in late fall.

AMENITIES

Auto tour loops, hiking trails, boardwalks, observation decks, restrooms, boat launches, photo blinds, camping. Spring Wings Festival held each year; this year it's on May 9. Refuge headquarters is in Fallon at 1020 New River Pkwy., Ste. 305; open 8-5 Monday-Friday. Information kiosk and maps available after business hours.

ACCESS

National wildlife refuge. Open 24 hours. No fees. Roads are well marked.

TIPS

Bring water, food, sunscreen, and a hat. Cell-phone service is sketchy. Dirt roads can be muddy when wet.

FOR MORE INFO

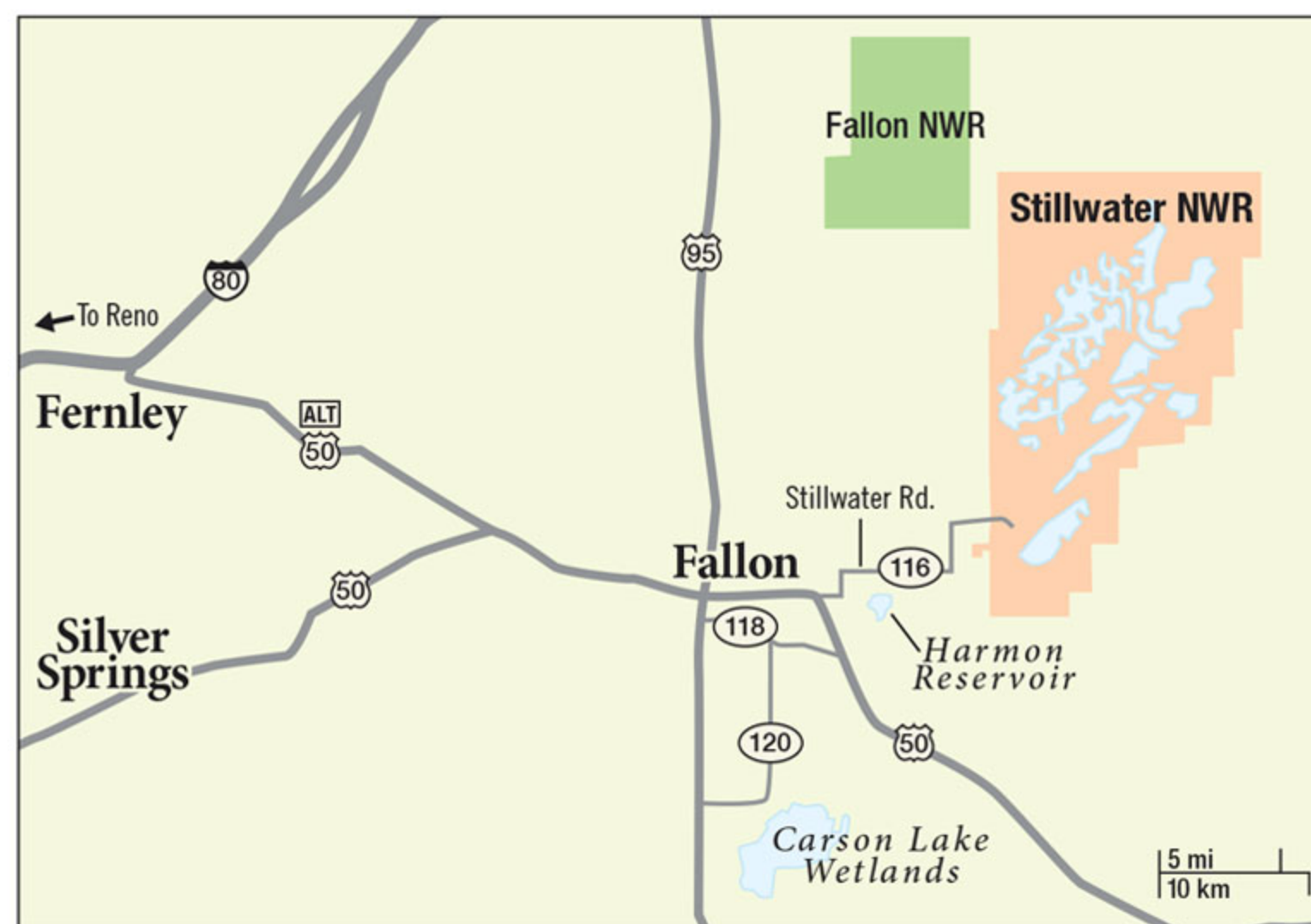
Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge, (775) 423-5128, www.fws.gov/refuge/Stillwater. Lahontan Audubon Society, www.nevadaudubon.org. Friends of Stillwater NWR, <http://friendsofstillwater.com>.

www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/hotspotsmap

stillwater national wildlife refuge

fallon, nevada

39°31'7.86"N 118°30'39.15"W



Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge spans 80,000 acres of the Lahontan Valley Wetlands about 75 miles east of Reno. From Fallon, take Hwy. 50 east for 4.6 miles, and turn left onto Stillwater Rd. (Hwy. 116). Continue for 15 miles as the road winds north and east, following the signs to the refuge entrance.

On hillsides along the way to the Stillwater refuge, you can still see the bathtub ring left by ancient Lake Lahontan, the ice-age sea that covered much of northwestern Nevada long ago. It persists as an isolated maze of wetlands at the terminus of the Carson River.

The high-desert oasis is a designated Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve. Half of the Pacific Flyway's Canvasback population stops here, Snowy Plovers are regular nesters, and Nevada's largest number of Bald Eagles spends the winter.

I like the wide-open skies and the raised levee roads for spotting distant hawks and for watching deer and other desert wildlife. I stopped recently at flooded alfalfa fields along Stillwater Road to look at White-faced Ibis and Great Egrets. During spring visits, the Russian olives and tamarisks that line the irrigation canals are often dotted with migrant warblers. The wooden boardwalk at Foxtail Lake leads into cattails and bulrushes filled with Yellow-headed Blackbirds. And the floating platform at the lake's edge is a great place to wait and watch for birds. I was treated to close-up views of Western Grebes, American White Pelicans, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and a Ruddy Duck showing off its mating dance. — Audrey Medina

Audrey Medina is a freelance travel writer. She wrote about the Presidio in San Francisco, Hotspot Near You No. 180, in our February 2014 issue.

sites nearby

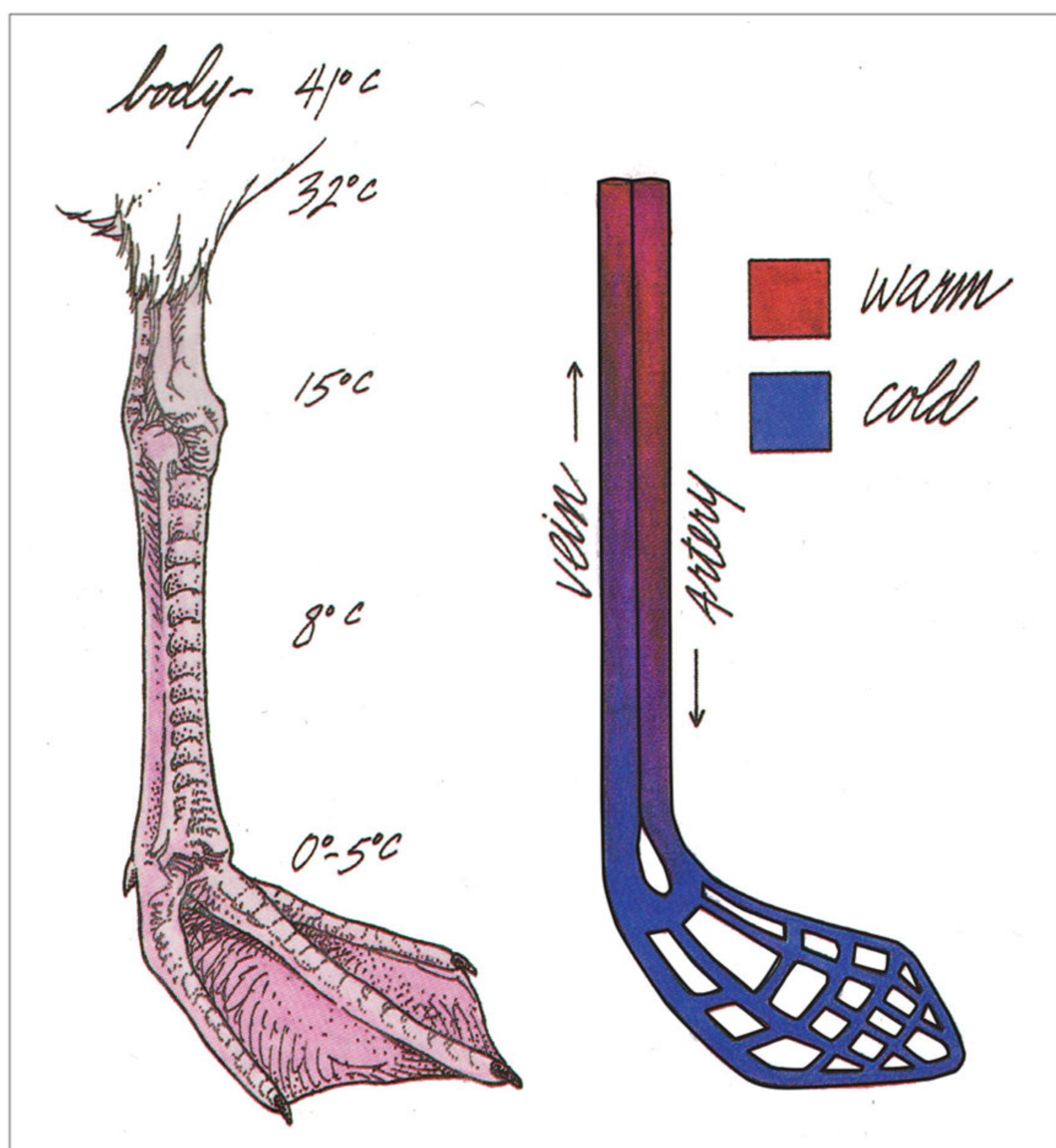
Tablet readers: Tap the links to read more about each site.

Carson Lake Wetlands

Nine miles south of Fallon on Hwy. 95, turn east on Hwy. 120, and drive two miles to Greenhead Hunting Club sign. Shorebirds, waterfowl, and raptors.

Harmon Reservoir

East of Fallon on Stuart Rd. Look for Black Tern, American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail, and warblers.



Michael McNelly (After Ricklefs, 1990. *Ecology*. W.H. Freeman, New York)

FROM COLD TO WARM: Two views of a gull's leg show how heat is exchanged between blood vessels.

Cold feet

The clever way birds keep unfeathered legs and feet warm

Whether a bird spends the winter in high latitudes or migrates to more southerly climes in fall has less to do with temperature than with food availability. Given a reliable food supply, birds can usually cope with the cold. As temperatures drop, birds can generate heat by shivering, but this is a temporary fix that requires a stepped-up metabolism and increased food intake. For the long term, passive mechanisms are preferred.

One adaptation for heat conservation is size. Birds of northern regions tend to be larger than similar birds from temperate zones. Bigger size gives birds a smaller surface-area-to-volume

ratio, so less body mass is exposed to skin and, therefore, less heat is lost. Larger size also increases a bird's fasting ability. Examination of House Sparrow survivors and victims of severe winter storms in Rhode Island in 1898 and in Kansas in 1978-79, for example, revealed that larger males were favored to survive in both cases.

Another adaptation is the number of feathers: Northern birds have more feathers in their winter plumage than in their summer plumage — both down and contour. The overlapping contour feathers hide a dense layer, closer to the skin, of loose down feathers that trap air,

an excellent insulator. Sometimes, in really cold weather, birds puff out their feathers to increase the amount of air next to the body. Birds protect their eyes and bill by tucking their head under the scapulars, the packet of feathers on the shoulder. Doing this also allows birds to breathe warm air.

But what about legs and feet, which are not covered by feathers? The legs of a few Arctic birds, such as the ptarmigans and Snowy Owl, are feathered all the way to the toes, but on most birds, the lower leg, toes, and web are bare.

The lower leg, the tarsus, is a single bone, the fused remnant of the metatarsals of the arch and ankle bones. It connects on top with another bone, called the tibiotarsus but known to many of us as the drumstick. Its lower part is usually bare, while the upper part is packed with muscle.

In cold weather, blood moving through the naked portions of the leg could lose enormous amounts of heat, forcing birds to compensate by producing similar quantities through metabolism (eating) or muscular activity — probably more than they could sustain, creating an impossible situation. The problem is that blood that is warm when it leaves the body will be cold when it returns to the body.

The solution is a countercurrent heat-exchange mechanism. Described simply, the main artery that carries warm blood down the leg is positioned next to a large vein that brings cooler blood back from the foot to the body. A shunt near the base of the toes allows most of the arterial blood to pass directly into the vein and return without going through the toes and webs and losing even more heat.

The venous blood absorbs heat from the warmer arterial blood next to it. As the venous blood continues toward the body, it comes in contact with even warmer parts of the artery, so heat is exchanged all the way from the bottom to the top of the leg.

In fact, the vein and artery do more than lie side by side: The vein branches into a network that surrounds the artery, thereby increasing the surface area in

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Tap the links below to read more articles by Eldon Greij.

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contact with it and maximizing the heat exchange. Consequently, blood arriving back in the body is only slightly cooler than what originally left to go to the legs.

Some of the blood at the bottom of the leg bypasses the shunt and runs through a capillary network in the toes and web. Then it passes through a smaller vein, rejoins with the larger vein, and returns to the body. The temperature of the blood in the web has been recorded at a few degrees above freezing. Theoretically, the blood could be below 0°C since chemicals in the blood can depress the freezing point. Birds' countercurrent heat-exchange system is not unlike systems used in industry, except it is more efficient.

The dry, scaly covering of birds' legs and feet prevents the skin drying and tissue damage that we would experience in cold situations. This, plus the countercurrent system, allows gulls and ducks to stand on ice for extended periods without apparent hardship. If temperatures drop far below zero, however, the birds would need to produce extra heat.

Most of the time, birds inhabiting northern climes handle the cold quite well. After all, if they didn't have adaptations to survive beastly low temperatures, northern winters would indeed be birdless and bleak.

Methods for surviving extreme cold, including the countercurrent heat exchange, are examples of the amazing structure and behavior of birds. 🐦

Eldon Greij is professor emeritus of biology at Hope College, located in Holland, Michigan, and the founding editor of *Birder's World* magazine.

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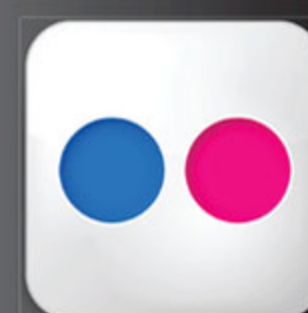
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Laura Erickson

1 OF 26: An Anna's Hummingbird shines in bright California sunlight.

Focus on fine points

How photographing birds opened up a whole new world

When I started birding, in 1975, I wasn't interested in photography. I was a college student and couldn't afford a telephoto lens or the expenses of film. More important, during that acquisitive period, I wanted nothing more than to see lots of birds and didn't want fiddling with a camera to slow me down.

I birded for more than two decades before I rethought things. I still didn't want to be a photographer; I just wished I had amassed the wonderful fruits of being a bird photographer without any of the hassle.

In about 2005, I began taking photos — first with an extended-zoom digital

camera and then via digiscoping. I still didn't think of myself as a photographer, and even now, I call myself a bird-watcher who takes pictures.

At first, I wanted to get shots of as many species as possible. After I had taken decent photographs of the birds in my backyard, I left my camera on a closet shelf unless I was going somewhere good.

Then I bought a digital SLR and started shooting multiple shots of even the most common birds with the setting on burst. Suddenly, a whole new world opened up for me. As I viewed my photos on my computer, I noticed tiny

details — ticks on a songbird's eyelid or face, for example — and quick actions, such as a hummingbird's tongue protruding to its full extent. Preening was easy enough to watch through binoculars, but all the interesting postures, too fleeting to absorb in the field, fascinated me. I took photo after photo of whatever birds were there.

In southern California, I photographed an Anna's Hummingbird that perched briefly on a spiky plant. In eight seconds, I took 26 photos, including one that captured his gorget in full, dazzling color as he faced into the sun and several that showed the gray pigment of those same feathers when he turned his head — a vivid lesson in iridescence. When I shot Atlantic Puffins on Machias Seal Island in Maine, I got close-ups that revealed the spiny roof of the mouth and the expandable gape. The adaptations help the bird carry a dozen or more fish at once without losing any of them.

Now I spend as much time or more photographing birds in my backyard as I do farther afield. Year-round, I lean out the open upstairs window, clicking away at birds in my box elder and cherry trees, and I sit for hours in my portable blind near busy feeders or shrubs. Wherever I happen to be, I photograph anything that holds still long enough to let me.

As Forest Gump might have put it, taking pictures of birds is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get, but it's certain to be sweet. 🐦

Laura Erickson is the author of *The Bird Watching Answer Book* and other books. Last year she won the American Birding Association's highest honor, the Roger Tory Peterson Award.

TABLET EXTRAS

Tap the links below to read more by Laura Erickson.

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Stare down



▲ **THE ODD COUPLE:** A Bald Eagle and a Blue Jay eye one another from perches overlooking Lake Michigan in southwestern Michigan. Nancy McKown shot the photo with a Canon 5D Mark III and a 500mm lens.



◀ **SUNBATHER:**

A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher soaks in the sun in Orlando, Florida. Gilbert W. Blankespoor of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, used a Canon Powershot SX50 HS to take the photo.

▼ **HAWK VS. FOOD:** A juvenile Red-tailed Hawk grabs a slithery snack in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Harry Collins took the photo in December 2014 with a Nikon D7100 and a 200-400mm lens.





ONLINE PHOTO OF THE WEEK CONTEST WINNER

November-December winner
California Condor • by Ron Mattson

Ron Mattson of Sierra Vista, Arizona, won our Photo of the Week Contest for November and December 2014 with this picture of a juvenile California Condor. He took it in mid-October at Horseshoe Bend, about 50 miles north-east of the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Professional photographer Gerrit Vyn was our judge. His photo of a Hooded Merganser appears on the cover of our February 2015 issue.

"I like the condor photo for a number of reasons, primarily related to the story

that it tells," Vyn says. "First, it was shot with a short focal length, which gives us a great look at the bird's environment and a sense of place. Second, the individual is an unbanded juvenile. This is significant. It indicates a chick that was hatched and fledged successfully in the wild — a critical step in the recovery of this critically endangered species.

"The fact that that is happening in the Grand Canyon region is something to be celebrated and is represented nicely in this image."

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Room for disagreement

In commenting on the sightings by Gene Sparling, Tim Gallagher, and Bobby Harrison, Jerome A. Jackson seems to forget a common occurrence of birdwatching ("Ghost Bird," February 2015, page 22): The latter two were accomplished birders,

even though not trained ornithologists, as he puts it, and doubtless they had seen many Pileated Woodpeckers in their years of birding. Thus, when they saw a different large bird in the Cache River NWR, they could tell that it wasn't a Pileated. For example, its gizz, its patterns of black and white, its large size and lanky shape, and black rather than dark brownish-black coloration were all different from the Pileated. Furthermore, Sparling had clearly described the bird, even though he was not prepared to name it, and his description surely differed from how he would have described a Pileated, or else Gallagher and Harrison would not have gone to the refuge.

Likewise, the numerous sightings shown on the map labeled "Reported Ivory-bill Sightings Since 1944" probably reflect actual glimpses of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in at least some of the cases. Not all of those people were deluded into calling a Pileated an Ivory-bill! And the unconfirmed sightings subsequent to the 2004 occurrence cannot all be considered a form of mass hysteria over the Ivory-bill.

I agree that the evidence for the bird's continued existence is not conclusive as of now. But there is room for disagreement about the status of this great bird, as well as over interpretation of the Luneau video. — *Katharyn Reiser, Austin, Texas*

First rate

Just a quick note to congratulate you on Jerome Jackson's special report in the



February issue. Really first rate all around. Important topic, and you gave him enough room to write it up properly. — *George Scott, New York, New York*

Close focus

In "Far and Near" Pete Dunne comments, "I submit that few adults need a binocular that focuses to 3½ feet" ("Birder at Large," December 2014, page 14). You do if, like many birders, you are also a butterflyer, if that's a word. In pursuing butterflies, I often need to focus that close; I am glad to have binoculars that will do it. — *Susan Cassidy, Ramona, California*

Duck hotspots

Readers of the list of diving-duck hotspots in Sheryl DeVore's article "Frozen" should be apprised that Guntersville Lake is in Alabama, not Tennessee (February 2015, page 19). — *Carroll Wilson, Jasper, Alabama*

Editor's note: We trust that readers will forgive us as well not only for misspelling Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge but also for placing it in South Carolina. It remains in North Carolina.

Write to us!

Send a letter to the editor at <http://bit.ly/WriteALetter> or mail@birdwatchingdaily.com, or write to BirdWatching Letters, 25 Braintree Hill Office Park, Suite 404, Braintree, Massachusetts 02184. Please include your name and postal address. We may edit your letter.

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Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary, Topsfield, Massachusetts, December 26, 2014, 2:07 p.m., by Kim Caruso

Kim Caruso watched a Red-tailed Hawk for a whole month last winter, so she knew its tendencies. It hunted regularly in three large fields at the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary north of Boston and used bluebird nest boxes as perches. On the day after Christmas, she watched it for four hours and made this photo, which she posted to the U.S. and Canada Gallery at BirdWatchingDaily.com.

"The hawk had captured and eaten a meadow vole less than 20 feet from where I was standing, so I took my camera off the tripod to kneel and shoot handheld at eye level," she says. "It was positioned at the edge of a field, so I knew, when it flew, it would initially head in my direction before choosing its next bluebird box to perch on. This was the third image in a series I shot during takeoff. Since it was so close, this is a full-frame photo with very little cropping."

Camera: Canon 7D

Lens: Canon EF 300mm f/2.8L IS with 1.4x teleconverter

Settings: 1/3200, f/4, ISO 500, Tv mode

Light: Natural

Format: RAW converted to JPG

Adjustments: Minimal cropping and sharpening



NEWCOMER: Kim Caruso is a small-animal veterinarian from Ipswich, Massachusetts. She took her first photos of birds in January 2014, during the Snowy Owl invasion, and became hooked during last spring's warbler migration. She subscribes to a digital edition of *BirdWatching* and shares photos in our galleries at BirdWatchingDaily.com. In August 2014, we featured her head-on shot of a Least Tern as an online Photo of the Week.

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Find the singer

Simple tricks that will help you locate a singing bird

Spring is the season for birdsong, but seeing the singer can sometimes be a challenge. Here are simple tricks that will help you locate a singing bird.

Our brain determines the direction of a noise based on when the sound reaches each ear. A sound coming from the right will reach your right ear a fraction of a second sooner than your left ear. Your brain calculates the difference and pinpoints the direction.

Listen to a singing bird for a minute or two and focus on direction. You can often get a better fix by turning your head, rather than holding it still. If you think a sound is coming from one direction, turn your head slightly and see if the sound remains where you expect it.

If the bird is moving as it sings, finding it will rely mostly on catching a glimpse of movement. If the bird seems to be stationary, chances are good it is on a favorite perch and will stay for several

“If a singing bird seems to be stationary, chances are good it is on a favorite perch.”

minutes or even longer. In that case, you can try to locate it by gathering more information on distance and height.

To determine distance, try using a technique known as triangulation. Listen from one spot, get a precise fix on the direction, and take note of landmarks along the line between you and where you think the bird might be — a distinctive tree trunk or bush, for example. Then move 10-20 feet to either side, pinpoint the direction of the singing bird again, and look along that line, checking against the landmarks from the first line. The point where the new line crosses the old one should mark the

location of the bird. It will also give you an idea of the distance.

To determine the height of a sound, use your brain's natural directional ability again, but turn it on its side. Face the sound and then lean sideways so that your head is horizontal. In that position, the lag between the sound reaching your two ears will tell you the vertical direction of the bird, rather than the horizontal direction.

Finally, anticipating the location of the singer is one of the most useful skills to develop. It will come with practice; the more you learn, the more you will see. 🐦

David Allen Sibley is the author of *The Sibley Guide to Birds, Second Edition*, *Sibley's Birding Basics*, and field guides to the birds of eastern and western North America. In our last issue, he described how to identify streaky sparrows by their back pattern.

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